ISSN 0951-8460

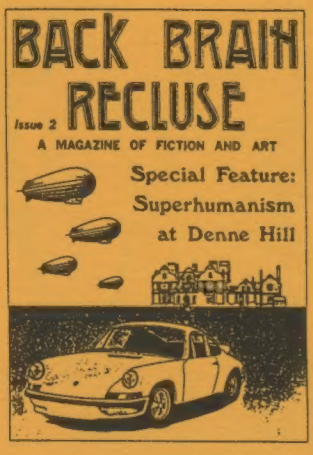
# The Best of BACK BRAIN RECLUSE

No: 1
£1:50

ORIGINAL FICTION AND ART

# CONTENTS

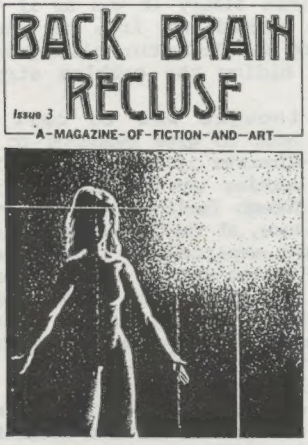

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 4 | THE SPIDERMONGER | Simon C. Jones |
| 9 | CAMERA OUT | Steve Sneyd |
| 10 | ALL IN THE GAME | D'Israeli |
| 13 | THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ARTFUL DODGER | Chris Reed |
| 20 | AFTER THE RAID | Andrew Darlington |
| 22 | STEPPENWOLF | Anne Dyer |
| 26 | ... BESIDE THE SEASIDE, BESIDE THE SEA ... | Simon Clark |
| 30 | THE FALCON | Michael Moorcock |
| 32 | FLICKERING BLUE EXTREME | t. Winter-Damon |
| 33 | MIRROR MIRROR ON THE WALL | Anne Dyer |

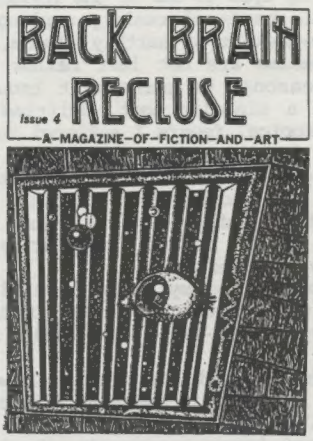


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 43 | SWINGING THE LEAD | Tom Bingham |
| 44 | SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO | Steve Sneyd |
| 46 | THE CURSE OF MAN | Michael Moorcock |
| 47 | CIRCULAR ERROR | Andrew Darlington |
| 53 | KING OF A NUTSHELL | Steve Sneyd |
| 54 | AZIMUTH: A MATTER OF ASCENDANCY | D'Israeli |
| 55 | DEATH TRAP | Chris Reed |


'LAZY SUNDAY AFTERNOON' - COVER BY KAISER BILL

ILLUSTRATED BY MATT BROOKER (pp.5-6, 8-9, 27-31, 48-53), SIMON C. JONES (p.7), DALLAS GOFFIN (p.34), D'ISRAELI (pp.44-45), AND KAISER BILL



# THE SPIDERMONGER

Simon C. Jones

To be scornful of the supernatural I would once have listed amongst the qualities of a good scientist; to admit of exceptions to the discoverable laws of Physics without respectable proof I would have lectured against at the Royal Society.

Now, however, I find myself recanting both points of view by setting down as fact, in my earnest desire to explore all the facets of the Universe, an experience of my own which may have been wholly subjective, but which was otherworldly in its effects and, I pray, unrepeatable under any conditions.

I was dying, that at least was the opinion of a well respected Harley Street physician whose name I will not demean by mentioning in relation to such a false diagnosis. It may well be that the incident itself in some way changed my health, and I do him an injustice by proclaiming his judgement untrue. Yet I still live, though with my vigour impaired. Of this possibility the reader of this account more objectively can judge.

Perhaps the long illness running close to Death opened my eyes to one of the invisible and impalpable bands of reality unploughed by the truth-seekers of earthly wisdom. If so, those realms are not left fallow for frivolous reasons. Or perhaps it brought delusions of a singular sort, delirium so unlike the tropical fevers I suffered in my youth on the Egyptian expedition that I did not recognise it as false. The expedition that made my late Uncle famous, however, was plagued with deadly insects, and few westerners could be so familiar with hallucinatory maladies as I.

I cannot comment on my state of mind in those days when I waited, in my Uncle's house in Dymchurch-under-the-Wall, for Death.

I may have dreamed the things I will describe: if so my brain was more afflicted than my body.

The incident began one morning in July 1897, in the twilight that heralds dawn in the marsh country. I was awakened by a spreading pinkish grey light that pierced the easterly wall of my bedroom. It shone straight into my eyes yet did not dazzle or block my vision. The wall, with its load of shelved books on Egyptology, remained clear; it was as if I was looking at the wall through rose coloured spectacles.

The wall was not changed for the better, indeed the paint began to peel off, accelerating in its descent as if weighted. The books withered and their bindings cracked, a sight that appalled me since I had been raised among tomes almost sacred to my bibliophile Uncle. Diagrams of the Osirian Ankh and sketches of hieroglyphes misted down to the floor. The wall, which should have looked out over the Dover Road, ground itself into a veil of plaster, obscuring yet revealing a pale sky the colour of half-burnt flesh, and a wasteland of fallen masonry around the decayed pillars of which twined curious plants.

The lines of demarcation between this remarkable scene and the bedroom of the old family house were clear; it was as if the wall had been chopped away from the fabric of the building and distorting glass placed in the gap, hiding the cobbled street beyond.

My first thought was to call my housekeeper, both to give evidence to my sanity and to discover if the effect of the landscape on another was the same as its grasp on me. Though feelings may not be a scientific measure, at the appearance of the phantasm I had experienced tangible awe almost like a static charge, as if a force had stood the fine hairs on my cheek on end.

In the attempt I discovered I was paralysed, pinned down by the now reddish light as a naturalist might pin an insect to a cork board the better to study it.

The source of the light was a vast orb suspended at the horizon of the unearthly plain. A sun speared by mountains, of a red so dark as to hurt the eyes.

Only the functions of my body under conscious control were hampered by the paralysis, for I certainly continued to breath, and I recall blinking violently as a new light climbed into the sky. A blue-white star, a quarter the size of the other but with more than four times its brilliance, rose rapidly and scurried across the alien heavens, burning a trail through the fleshy tint as it did so.

I perceived that what I had taken to be the true sky was instead some form of cloud that broiled away in this new achromatic violence, leaving patches of pale violet in its wake. During the circuit of this smaller body the red star never moved from its position on the horizon, neither up nor down, nor did it do so during all my observations of that neverworld.

In the light of the smaller star, movements began to impress themselves on my over-perceptive senses. A rippling undulation ran through the faint foliage of the grasping plants. In the far left of my vision a discolouration spread as if some creeping tide disgorged floating wreckage there, and all around a slow but evident crumbling of the scattered structures took place.

It became obvious to me that I was party to some diurnal process of gradual destruction that would have taken ages on Earth. And all this time there had come to my alert senses not one sound from that scene; indeed I never heard any sound come from that portal until the end, and that call I can hear yet. For three more revolutions of the Blue star I watched, frozen, while one plant more ponderous than the rest crushed a pillar to rubble, tearing it up from the foundations which seemed to be set into the plain itself.

Then familiar objects began to appear, superimposed on that ultramundane view; the thick blinds and the wall itself cut off my sight of that ghostly land and with its passing I could move again.

Leaping up, for so compelled was I with the curiosity of the scientist that my physical infirmities were forgotten, I flung open the blinds.

Daylight flooded in. My eyes, adapted during the past two hours to a red eventide, watered copiously. Even with this impediment to sight I could make out the old cobbles of the Dover Road and the houses like an anodyne outreaching some wretched malady. How could I believe myself sane, comparing this scene with that I had just been exposed to. Was there no evidence, no link to justify my continued confidence in my own mind? Then my eyes caught it, glinting like phosphorescent seaweed on the stones of the churchyard, the same blue-white shadow the small star had cast as it wheeled over the alien domain. I slammed the blind down, panting now as my sickness returned. It was fifteen minutes before I could bring myself to look out again. Of the light there was no sign. I felt almost disappointed.

I told no one of it that day. I knew the nature of my illness and the conclusions they would draw from it. I did not know if the phenomenon would occur a second time, in the presence of witnesses, or indeed if it would return at all.

I spent the day in research. My Uncle had collected a vast number of reference works, not only in his own subject but in others such as Botany which had hitherto interested me little, if at all.

I discovered that the plants resembled no known species of chlorophyll based foliage still existent in the modern world. Certain of their characteristics, however, recalled the giant prehistoric ferns from which much of the world's coal was to form.

The plants seemed to be parasitic, though in retrospect that judgement was biased. Raised by an Uncle to whom the pyramids were at once temples and masterpieces, I had inherited a feel for antiquities, ancient

# The Best of BACK BRAIN RECLUSE

Oakleigh, 16 Somersall Lane,
Chesterfield, Derbyshire.

Edited by CHRIS REED
ISSN 0951-8460

**Single copies:**

UK: £1:50 US: $5:00
Europe: £1:70 Elsewhere: £2:50

**BACK BRAIN RECLUSE** ISSN 0269-9990

| **Single copies:** | **Subscriptions:** |
|---|---|
| UK: 70p | £2:50 |
| US: $3:00 | $10:00 |
| Europe: 80p | £3:00 |
| Elsewhere: £1:20 | £4:50 |

**NOTELETS** (pack of 10 including envelopes)

UK: £1:30 US: $3:00
Europe: £1:45 Elsewhere: £2:00

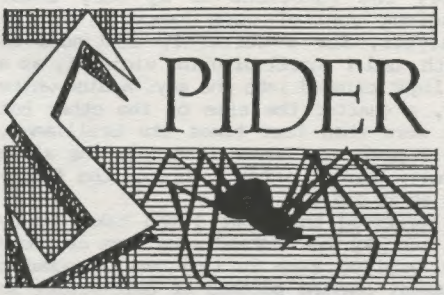
Cheques and postal orders only please. All prices include postage and packing. Overseas please add £1:00 value to cover exchange charges if not paying in English or US currency.

Unsolicited submissions of words or artwork are welcomed, but MUST be accompanied by an SAE or they cannot be replied to. Prospective contributors are advised to consult the submission guidelines, available for SAE. No responsibility will be accepted for any damage to or loss of material submitted.

Submissions will also be accepted on 5.25" diskette suitable for IBM PC.

**ALL CONTRIBUTORS RETAIN INDIVIDUAL COPYRIGHT OVER THEIR MATERIAL**

BACK BRAIN RECLUSE
© CHRIS REED 1987

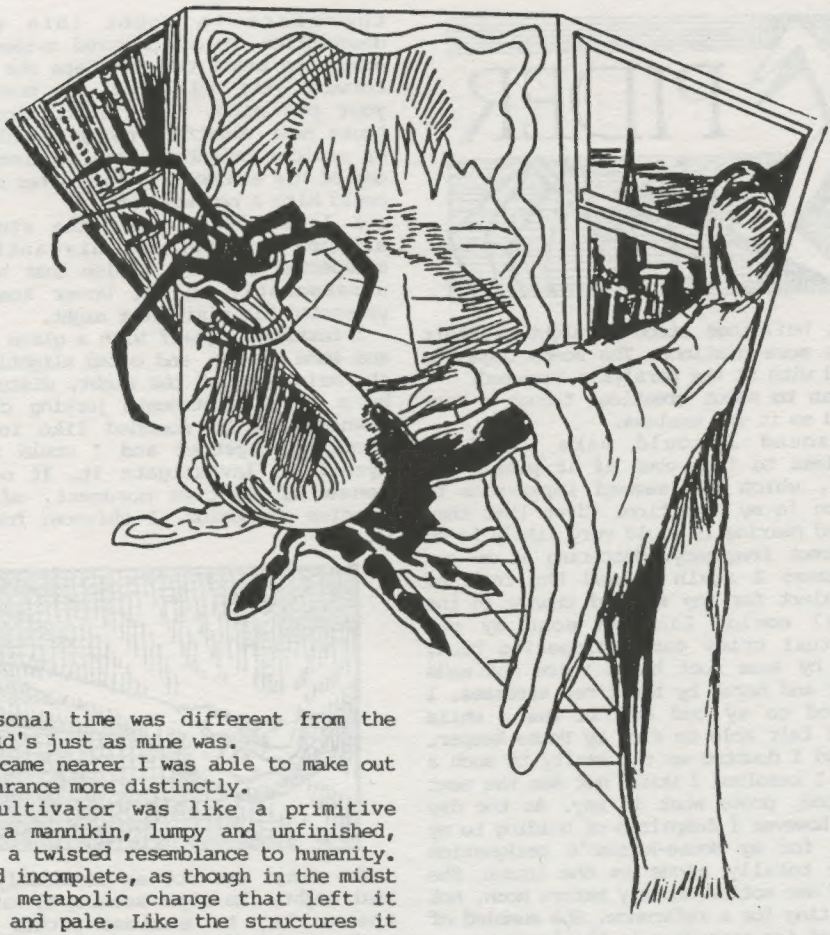



buildings especially, and to see these mindless plants bring down the relics of another race was abhorrent to me. I felt they were leeches, vampires, enhancers of a decay out of step with my world. That judgement was an uninformed one, an emotive expression; the plants filled a niche that was empty: if any blame is to be allotted it must go to their cultivators. I am far from sure however that blame can be allotted in this matter, there is so much of that world I may have misunderstood. I have had long to think on the events of those three days. At that time I was panicking in a rigid fashion, applying my moralities to an otherworldly frame; now I wonder if the terms Good and Evil are not rational observed things but prejudices made anthropomorphic.

I am ashamed of my actions during the incident, and it is partly because of this that I risk my reputation to lay my story - real or unreal - before the scientific world. The second night all happened as before. It was as if in the absence of an observer nothing had taken place in that ruddy eldritch plain. New insights came, however. I have written of a plant overturning a pillar whose foundations were deep; I now saw how deep. The plain itself was nothing more than a vast floor cut of the same dark rock as the pillars. The gullies and ravines of that plain, now hedged with the crouching plants, were magnified versions of the symbols cut on the masonry. The whole scene was a ruined metropolis greater than a human city.

It was so obvious now, I cursed myself for a fool. It was as I was doing so that I caught my first glimpse of a Cultivator.

The creature was at first a mere white speck running curiously out of step in the middle distance. It had a strange means of locomotion: a shifting, hopping glide that reminded me of long legged cranes. It seemed almost to ripple as it progressed, as if its



own personal time was different from the otherworld's just as mine was.

As it came nearer I was able to make out its appearance more distinctly.

The Cultivator was like a primitive statue, a mannikin, lumpy and unfinished, but with a twisted resemblance to humanity. It looked incomplete, as though in the midst of some metabolic change that left it listless and pale. Like the structures it aged noticeably in one cycle of the Blue star.

The plants unclasped at the creature's touch. For a moment I wondered if it was the caretaker of this place, making a long delayed inspection, but it became apparent its concern was for the plants. It preened them, scraping the accretions of decay from the supple feelers. As it approached the nearest pillars it stopped and I was struck by a sudden fear. Suppose the window into their world was two-directional, what if it could see me? The fear passed and I became elated. To me had fallen a chance to achieve what no other on Earth had done: a chance to make contact with an intelligent non-human being. Then I began to see just how faint that chance was. I was paralysed, and even if I had been free to move I could not have been sure that communication would be possible with a being that was alien to the entire forming history of my species.

The creature stopped now, and in full view of the aperture it cast its featureless head about as if utilising some sense or perception unknown to man.

The discolouration to my left had risen into a tsunami, and at that moment the great swell burst and a whirlpool of silk-carried spiders swarmed down across the plain.

The Cultivator turned and, with others of its kind, raised silent keening over the plants, whose fronds grappled with the spiderstorm, trapping arachnids in their tendrils. Around each spider a penumbra of vitality spread. The creatures seemed more active, the vegetation more lavish; even the

ancient buildings stood straighter, their carvings more distinct. The scene began to fade and with it the paralysis lessened.

I began to shout greetings though I knew as I did so it was useless.

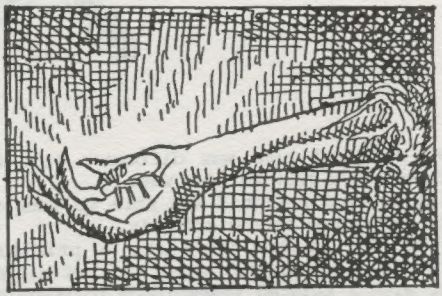
Any sound I could make would be meaningless to them even if it passed the barrier, which had seemed impervious to vibration in my direction. Given that they possessed hearing it would very likely be on a different frequency. Muttering at my own uselessness I again opened the reformed blind, alert for any sign of change in the external world. Like an echo my own ineffectual cries came whispering back, intoned by some mock human voice and made sibilant and harsh by their new stresses. I collapsed on my bed and it was a while before I felt able to ring my House-keeper. Never had I doubted my own sanity to such a degree. I resolved I would not see the next dawn alone, prove what it may. As the day wore on however I despaired of holding to my resolve, for my House-keeper's resignation left me totally alone in the house. She tendered her notice shortly before noon, not even waiting for a reference. She mumbled of patches of ice spreading in the lower house, of good food yesterday now rotting, of dust and decay.

I was testily forced to accept her departure, and though I was pleased that there was more evidence of the rapid aging invading this dimension, her final statement chilled me to the bone. She claimed to have seen an old beggar hanging around the house, a hunched cowled figure who moved in circles around the building with a peculiar hopping gait, carrying a large bundle which seemed to move as if breathing. The beggar seemed to have stirred her more than the physical effects; certainly it caused disagreeable expectations in my mind.

Since my later experiences and partial recovery I have advertised at length for her testimony but to no avail. It is possible therefore to doubt this reported description. My own personal evidence is not enough to prove this. Perhaps she will come forward yet; until then you must make up your own mind. I was still alone in the house near nightfall though my old friend, my medical neighbour, had promised to send one of his students to look after me until I could hire a new servant.

I later learnt that the student had slipped and twisted his ankle on an unexpected covering of ice that had formed unseasonably on the Dover Road, which prevented his visit that night.

I fortified myself with a glass of brandy and some cheese, and dozed slightly through the main part of the night, disturbed only by a brittle staccato jerking click from downstairs. It sounded like long bones knocking together and I could not bring myself to investigate it. It conveyed a sense of furtive movement, of inhuman precise searching. I shivered towards the dawn.



The image was not as distinctly removed that night, the edges seeming to eat more of the walls, to enclose rather than be enclosed by the fabric of my dwelling. I equated this with the increase of decay in my world, a wholesale leaking of energy into that blasted red and blue inferno. Whispers of sound began to pulse the air, echoes on the verge of audibility as if miles of distance interposed between the view and me.

On the plain the spiders were piled in a vast latticework cage built from the ancient pillars themselves. I wondered at the thriftiness of the Cultivators - if the capture of the arachnids with their strange life giving fields had been their aim - and at their use of the ruins for materials and as a training ground for the plants. Now they prepared to leave: the harvest or pest-removal (if either concept fits) was finished. The pallid creatures looked more youthful and vigorous in the ambience of the

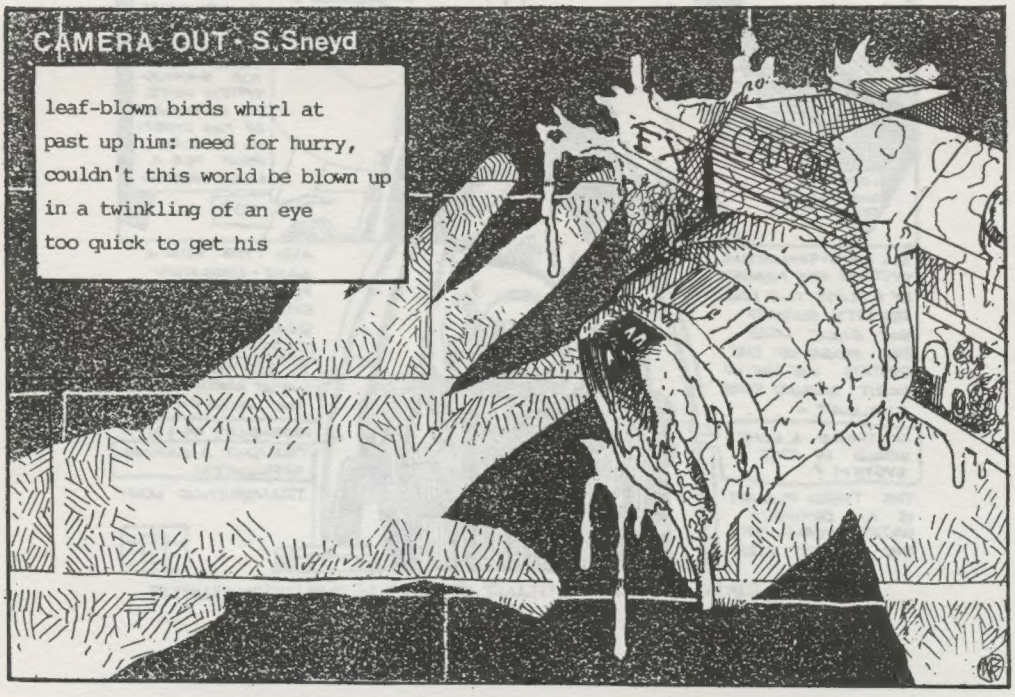
great insects. They still impressed on me a vast upwelling of energy and ... happiness, though I suspect our emotions cannot be forced to apply to them. They grew taller and taller, fading as they did so. the massive cage of ruined carved pillars blazed with light from the insect engravings and seemed to extend into some hitherto unthought-of direction. The thin dust of the plain's floor swirled about the cage, the captives, and the ever lengthening Cultivators, and then they were gone. I had witnessed something beyond human science, possibly beyond human understanding. reaved of the preserving fields of the spiders, time reached its withered hand across an empty plain and at last the few remaining pillars went the way of mummies taken carelessly from the tomb.

The disturbed dust settled and grew thicker. From behind me, like an omen, I heard a loping step upon the old stairs. That hissing of my futile greetings was indescribably horrible, not least in the likeness of the voice to mine. The Cultivator stood in the doorway to my room, its rough limbs gesturing aimlessly. It was wrapped in clothes made of the spidersilk, and with the alien movements of its long limbs, angular and strange, I saw why it had so distressed my House-keeper. It was the image of medieval drawings of Death, lacking only the scythe to emulate them flawlessly.

Terrified, all thoughts of contact gone, under some deep human fear of the unknown I strained against the paralysis, as with slow deliberation it withdrew a spider from its sack of silk and thrust it towards me, Instinctively, finding my bonds dissolved, I attacked.

Since then I have realised that the field of the spider restored me, breaking not only the stasis but also that fatal illness at my throat. I have thought that they might have seen me through the portal, seen the artifacts of intelligence about me, and sent an envoy in peace and friendship. They were sadly misled. In my fear and new found strength, I was as thoughtless as a savage from man's prehistory, and as wild. I seized the Cultivator by the neck and hurled it from me into the vision that hung maddeningly before me. As it broke into that dying World it uttered a cry so piercing and terrible I will recall it to my shame forever. The veil between the worlds formed again and has not reopened. There is no evidence to my vision and my crime save a scrap of silk finer than human weft.

RECORDED IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 1898

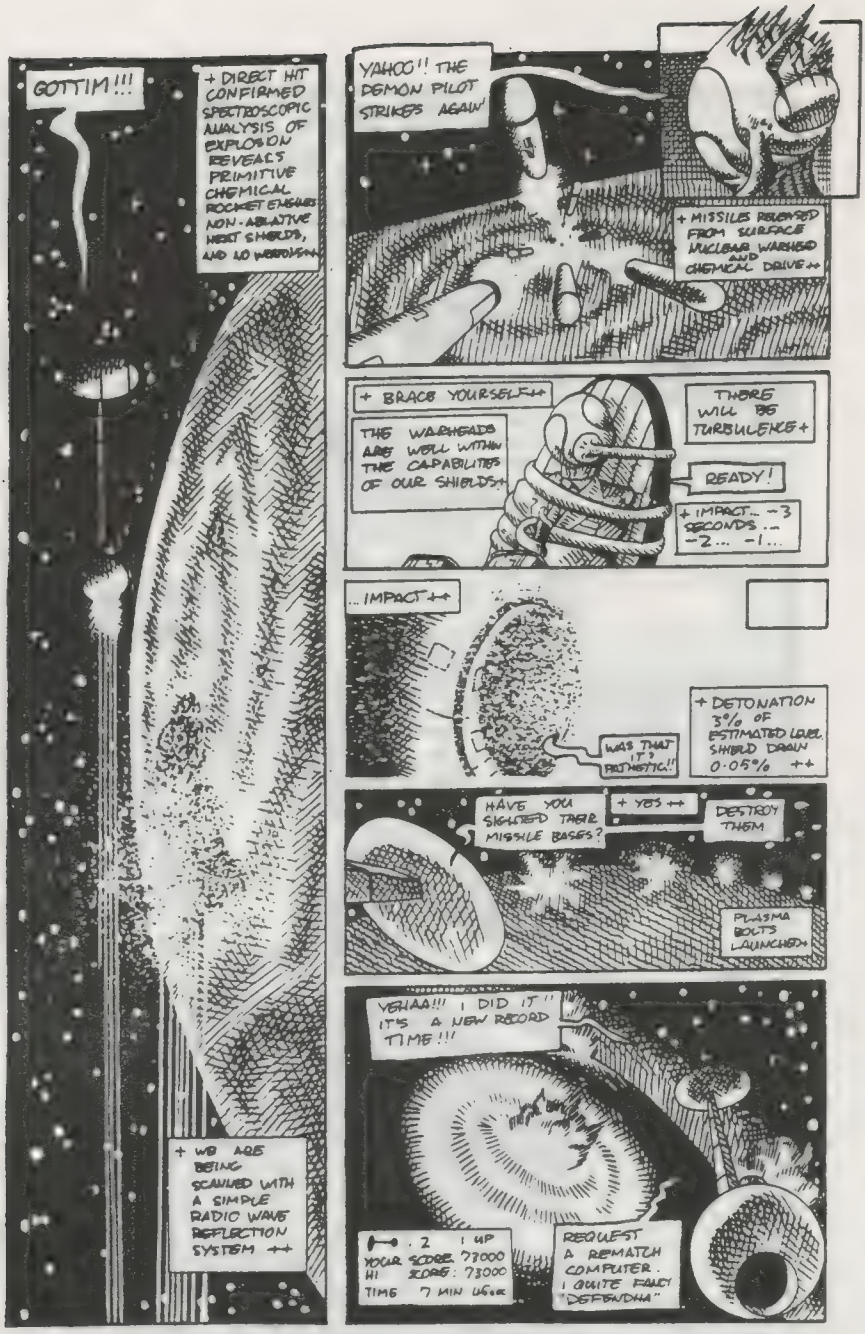

CAMERA OUT · S.Sneyd
leaf-blown birds whirl at
past up him: need for hurry,
couldn't this world be blown up
in a twinkling of an eye
too quick to get his
EX
CANON

+EMERGENCY++
HULL SUPERHEATING
TURBULENCE MAY CAUSE DAMAGE BEFORE RE-ENTRY +
+ RE - ENTRY++
...ALL IN THE
GAME
BY D'ISRAELI
+ HYPER SPACE JUMP COMPLETED + + HULL HEATED TO 30% OF CRITICAL LEVEL BY HYPER-TURBULENCE +
+ MINOR DAMAGE TO SHIP : REPAIR TIME 17.5 MINUTES.++
WHERE ARE WE ?
+ POSITION UNCERTAIN++
CLASS 05 STAR
PLANET 2
+ THE HYPERSPACE STORM TOOK US OFF COURSE, BUT OF THE STAR POSITIONS MATCH THOSE FOR GAMING SYSTEM 0472. THE COMPOSITION OF THIS SYSTEM IS, HOWEVER, RIGHT FOR A GAMING SYSTEM++
SO?
ALL GAME-SIMULATION SYSTEMS ARE MARKED BY A CLASS TWO LOW DENSITY RINGED GAS GIANT NEAR THE EDGE OF THE SYSTEM. WE ARE IN ORBIT AROUND SUCH A PLANET. +
IS THERE A GAME-WORLD IN THIS SYSTEM ?
THE THIRD PLANET IS AN OXYGEN/WATER WORLD OF THE CORRECT SIZE
AND TYPE FOR A GAME-SIMULATION PLANET ... IT IS ALSO EMITTING RADIO SIGNALS OF THE CORRECT TYPE. +
SO YOU'RE SAYING WE'VE ARRIVED AT THE WRONG GAMEWORLD?
PROBABILITY 96.5% +
TRANSMIT A GAMING APPLICATION.
TRANSMITTING NOW+

REQUEST GAMING LICENCE FOR 'PLANET STRIKER'-IS PERMISSION GRANTED?

MEANWHILE, ON THE THIRD PLANET...
IT SUDDENLY APPEARED IN ORBIT AROUND SATURN, MR. PRESIDENT!! NOW IT'S SENDING US A RADIO MESSAGE
CAN YOU TRANSLATE IT?
NO... BUT I SUGGEST THAT WE RE-TRANSMIT THE SAME MESSAGE TO SHOW THAT WE'RE RECEIVING THEM...
GO AHEAD FISCHER... YOU'RE THE EXPERT.
+ THEY'RE REPLYING ++
WHY IS IT SO INCOMPLETE?
SHIP 04722/K
T GA ING I ENCE
R I PERMISSION GRANTED
+ THERE IS SOME MAGNETIC INTERFERENCE ++ HOWEVER, IT DOES SAY "PERMISSION GRANTED" +
27
OH, WELL IN THAT CASE...
ATTACK!
+ "PLANET STRIKER" LOADED
+ PHOTON DRIVE: 100% THRUST
+ CONFIGURATION: 100%
+ ACCELERATION: 10000 GRAVITIES
+ VELOCITY 99.99% OF LIGHTSPEED AND INCREASING
+ WEAPONS AND SHIELDS ON STANDBY
+ETA: 17.215 MINUTES SHIP TIME/ 3 HRS. IN STATIONARY TIME*
17.215 MINUTES (OR 3 HOURS) LATER...
+ ACCELERATION: - 10000 GRAVITIES PLANETARY ORBIT ACHIEVED ++
WHAT'S THAT?
SMALL, AERODYNAMIC SPACESHIP, POSSIBLY AN ORBITAL/ ATMOSPHERIC FIGHTER + NO SHIELDS++
+ NO RADIATION EMITTED ++ CONCLUSION: DRIVE AND WEAPONS ARE NON ATOMIC: POSSIBLY GRAVITY REPULSION AND LASERS.
ARM THE PLASMA BOLT PROJECTORS.
+ PULSE ARMED ++
+ FORCE SHIELD READY ++

* DUE TO EINSTEIN'S RELATIVITY EFFECTS.


GOTTIM!!!
+ DIRECT HIT CONFIRMED SPECTROSCOPIC ANALYSIS OF EXPLOSION REVEALS PRIMITIVE CHEMICAL ROCKET ENGINES NON-ABLATIVE HEAT SHIELDS, AND NO WEAPONRY +
+ WE ARE BEING SCANNED WITH A SIMPLE RADIO WAVE REFLECTION SYSTEM ++
YAHOO!! THE DEMON PILOT STRIKES AGAIN
+ MISSILES DELIVERED FROM SURFACE NUCLEAR WARHEAD AND CHEMICAL DRIVE ++
+ BRACE YOURSELF ++
THE WARHEADS ARE WELL WITHIN THE CAPABILITIES OF OUR SHIELDS ++
THERE WILL BE TURBULENCE +
READY!
+ IMPACT... -3 SECONDS... -2... -1...
...IMPACT ++
WAS THAT IT? PATHETIC!!
+ DETONATION 3% OF ESTIMATED LOCAL SHIELD DRAIN 0·05% ++
HAVE YOU SIGHTED THEIR MISSILE BASES?
+ YES ++
DESTROY THEM
PLASMA BOLTS LAUNCHED
YEHAA!!! I DID IT!! IT'S A NEW RECORD TIME!!!
2 1 UP
YOUR SCORE 73000
HI SCORE: 73000
TIME 7 MIN 46sec
REQUEST A REMATCH COMPUTER. I QUITE FANCY "DEFENDHA"

D'END

# The Rise and Fall of The Artful Dodger

## Chris Reed

Mick knew the fair was coming to town when the posters went up a fortnight before, gaudy beacons to whet the appetite for the event to come. One of these advertisements was put up in the dirty little cafe where Mick spent his empty days, out of work and out of time, dreaming the hours away until he had to go home to the daily chips and something his mother cooked him for tea.

John, the cafe's proprietor, climbed down from the chair he'd been standing on and stood back to look up at the poster, fixed to the wall amongst the remains of previous years' adverts which had been carelessly ripped down, tearing where they'd been taped at the corners to leave uneven triangles of discoloured white scattered across the wall.

"You going to the fair then, Mick?" he asked, wiping his greasy hands on the front of his once-white apron.

"Course I am," Mick replied without shifting his gaze from the splash of colour in front of him. Of course he was going to the fair. It was inconceivable that he would miss this one chance a year of escaping from the dreary world of daily life in John's Cafe, of losing himself for an hour or two in the electronic maze of sideshows and stalls. He dreamed of the bright lights, the multicoloured flashing neon signs and the tinny music piped through cheap loudspeakers. And above all he dreamed of the hustling bustling crowds of people, laughing, joking, eating candyfloss and ice cream and enjoying themselves. Here at last in this momentary world of leisure he was their equal, here it did not matter who he was or where he worked or that he didn't even have a job. Mick sat and stared at the poster, and dreamed the day away.

Tuesday was the day Mick got paid, so instead of heading straight for John's Cafe he had to go and queue for his money with all his Tuesday acquaintances, people he knew for only a few moments a week but whom he could depend on seeing at the same place at the same time as regular as clockwork. Then, the folded notes hot in his back pocket, he went back to his habitual haunt at the cafe.

In a state of heady extravagance that this temporary wealth always brought about in him Mick indulged in a cup of tea. As he busied himself with the teapot John remarked:

"You'll be off down the fair tonight, I suppose then Mick."

The words stunned the young lad. "What! Is it tonight?" He glanced at the poster to confirm the date. "Christ, I'd forgotten all about it!"

"S'funny how time flies ain't it?" agreed the other man. "Still, you've timed it just right, you just being paid today though."

"Yeah, what little of it's left after I've paid mother," replied Mick, digging into his pocket for some coins to pay for the tea.

"Don't worry about it lad, that one's on

me."

"Cheers John!"

Mick gulped the steaming tea down as quickly as he could without scalding his tongue, then dashed out into the street. he didn't stop running until he reached the municipal recreation ground on the other side of town, but he was too late: curled around like a gaudy wild west wagon train, the lorries and trailers that comprised the fair in transit were already beginning to disgorge machinery and equipment on to the playing field.

Damn! He'd missed it! He'd missed the arrival of the fair in town, lost his chance to experience the age old feeling of excitement and anticipation that his ancestors had felt when migrant gipsies had come to peddle their wares, when people had flocked to see what new inventions they had bought with them from the far reaches of the Earth. It had been different in those days. Now nobody except Mick cared that there were strangers in town.

He watched disconsolately through the railings as the components were unloaded, bumper cars and roller coaster trolleys and scaffold-like metalwork that seemed to serve no recognizable purpose. He walked along until he came to the main gates, then turned in and cut across the turf towards the parked vehicles. As he approached, Mick felt the tingle in his nostrils of the oil and petrol that went arm in arm with the fairground machinery, the distinctive tang which pervaded the fair like an aura and would remain like an afterglow long after everything was packed up again and the fair was back on the road once more. All the equipment seemed in disarray, as though everything had been unloaded without a thought for grouping allied components together.

Yet Mick sensed that these men had been doing this work day in day out for God knew how many years, and that their experience placed some obscure method in their madness. He picked his way through these chaotic yet strangely ordered surroundings, the workers paying him scant attention as he passed, as though by some tacit reciprocal arrangement with the townsfolk they too had become oblivious to strangers in their midst.

He went over to where a man with the physique of a circus strongman was directing three others in the unloading of what looked like helter skelter sections. Mick felt daunted by the man's appearance, and waited for a convenient break in the work before speaking.

"Er, excuse me," he began hesitantly. He flinched instinctively as the big man swung round to face him, but a broad smile had already cracked the foreman's face.

"Hello son, what can I do for you?" he beamed.

"Do you know if there's any odd jobs going begging that I can do please?" Mick asked, reassured by the other man's openness. The foreman pondered for a second, rubbing his chin with a massive hand.

"No, I don't think so son. Carlos has been off sick but he's back now, and I can't think of anyone else who's off. No, I'm sorry son, I'm afraid I can't help you."

"Oh, okay. Thanks all the same though. I'll be hanging around near the gate if you need me at all."

"Alright son, I'll bear that in mind." The big man smiled again then turned back to his work. Mick watched for a few moments as the next section of helter skelter was unloaded, then retraced his path back out of the fair. He found a place to sit on the brickwork below the railings and settled himself to watch and wait.

For a while there was only the gathering of vehicles in front of him to regard, with their painted sides in the same style as the poster in the cafe. He imagined the fair packed up and on the move, a procession of hoardings snaking along the road that proclaimed to all the world:

"Come to the fair! Come with us to the fair TONIGHT!"

What was it like to be part of that itinerant band of men and women, to be travelling forever from town to town and from country to country, a journey that for these people never had an end? What was it like to wake up each morning to find yourself somewhere new, but never having the time to stop and explore and find out where you really were? Mick had already tried to integrate himself into the fair community if only for a few hours by asking to help set up the stalls and shows, but that attempt had been in vain and so he would probably never know what the experience was like.

The sound of a diesel generator slowly intruded on his daydream and turned his attention back to the scene before him. Already the familiar shape of the helter skelter had raised itself above the rest of the equipment over on the left hand side, and more centrally the triangular gantry that supported the ferris wheel was stretching its branches towards the sky. More quickly now, as if a fertile sun had risen over the fairground, other amusements

began to take shape. Merry-go-rounds, chairplanes, whirling whips and, Mick noted with glee, a big dipper, heaved themselves up one by one into position, but all the while the iron tendrils of the big wheel groped ever higher like a self propagating icon to diversion.

More generators started up, and the whiff of diesel on the wind became stronger. Bumper cars were put into position on the dodgem rink, and electricity sparked as their motors were tested. A roller coaster reared up in the background as though trying to landscape the scene, and soon trolleys on their test runs were racing over the humps and bumps in a silent parody of the amusement they would afford in the hours to come. Lights were strung up and tested, loudspeakers checked with a discordant cacophony that held more promise than the tuning of an orchestra before a symphonic performance. The crowning glory came as the ferris wheel slowly began to rotate, and Mick felt an overwhelming sense of relief that everything was running perfectly for the evening. He looked at his watch for the first time since he arrived at the fairground and, possessed by a serene calm, decided that it was time to go home for his tea.

God had created the Earth in six days and on the seventh He had rested: the temporary escape world of the fair had been created in only six hours, and it wouldn't rest until he, Mick, had had his fill of it.

"Graham phoned. Said he'd meet you at seven."

Mick's mother placed the plate of fried food in front of him, and, her duty done, went back to her business in the kitchen. Mick devoured the chips and something automatically, and had forgotten what the something was by the time the taste had been washed out of his mouth by the last drop of water from his glass. He left the plate where it was on the table and went outside again.

Dusk was already beginning to fall, and when Mick reached the bus stop night-time was complete. He leaned against the wall by a shop doorway and watched people going by. The orange hue the streetlamps cast on their faces was boring in comparison to the spectrum of colours that awaited him at the fair. The folded notes of his dole money in his back pocket pressed reassuringly against his buttock, and he remembered without concern that he had forgotten to pay his mother his keep. Well, that was just tough. She'd have to go without for once, or else chance her luck with what was left when he got back, because Mick was going to the fair To Have A Good Time.

A bus pulled into view, and Mick stepped out of the doorway to get a better look at the passengers, but Graham wasn't amongst them. He leant back against the wall and prepared himself for another wait. It was nearly twenty minutes before the next bus arrived, but his strange calmness still prevailed and the delay meant nothing. Graham had brought Steve, another of Mick's friends, with him. Mick knew both of them from his school days a long year ago, but they had been luckier than him and been able to find work, so they were only able to meet up with him in the evenings or at the weekend.

The three friends set off for the fairground, cutting across the town centre and then joining a stream of people along a street that led directly to the playing fields. They could see some of the garish fairground lights at the bottom of the road as though at the end of a tunnel, a section of side show stalls and ferris wheel that beckoned them like a demented lighthouse to a haven of escape. One of a host of people with the same intentions, Mick felt his pulse start to race and his breathing quicken as the adrenalin started to flow. The evening air was alive with anticipation which he received, amplified and broadcast out again to those around him, so that the charge which built up as they neared the end of the street was released in a sudden electric explosion of light and sound as they finally broke out of the confines of the buildings that lined their way.

The fairground was already teeming with people by the time they got there. The entrance to the playing fields was situated inconveniently near a set of traffic lights so that cars and pedestrians mingled chaotically in the road, drivers impatient to park their vehicles and join those on foot hurrying to the gateway. Mick paid his entry fee and suddenly felt as though he had stepped into another world, an Eden where no ill existed. He wanted to laugh, dance, skip and run all at the same time. But where to go first? The big dipper, the ghost train, the dodgems all pulled in different directions so he didn't know where to turn. The chairplane then, or the candyfloss stall or the whirling whip. He saw them all in a myriad dance of sight and sound, a whirlpool of flashing lights, hawkers' cries, music and laughter.

Then, as the vision cleared by degrees, he let his two friends lead him through a press of people towards a coconut shy, grateful that at least for the moment decisions were being made for him. When his turn came he threw the wooden balls with little concern for whether they hit their mark, aware that this was no more than an aperitif for the more exciting amusements at the fair. He knew that Graham at least was unattached and eyeing the game, refraining from the major attractions until he had some company by his side. They moved on to the shooting gallery.

They were just approaching the candyfloss stall when Steve let out a low whistle and pointed to four girls who were coming towards them. Without a exchanging a word he and Graham moved as one and Mick, content to let the others do the talking, followed behind. The girls stopped to buy some candyfloss and were just opening their purses as Graham reached the stall, Steve hard on his heels.

"Give us another three mister and I'll pay for the lot," he said, giving the man a five pound note and smiling broadly at the girl nearest to him. It was, as experience had taught him, an approach that infuriated a lot of girls but that a good deal more found captivating. Luckily these four were of the majority, and a small chorus of thanks

accompanied the putting away of their money. As they moved away from the stall he slipped into his usual confident patter.

"D'you mind if we join you? I'm Graham and this is Steve and that's Mick ..."

Mick listened for a few moments as Graham found out the girls' names, lulled into the sense of well-being that his friend's words were intended to instill. They had already settled into a formation as they walked, Graham and Steve in front with three of the girls, with Mick following behind with the fourth. When he was certain she wasn't looking at him, Mick turned his head to study her profile. Her name was Nina, he remembered her saying, and in his opinion she was the best looking of the four. Her long dark hair bounced around her shoulders as though it had just been washed for that evening and her high cheekboned face gave her a slightly oriental aspect, hinting at maybe Chinese blood several generations back. Wild thoughts of Eastern Promise flooded through Mick's head and he allowed himself a few seconds of glorious indulgence before pulling himself back to the present.

She was not much shorter than him and walked with easy flowing movements, her black lacy skirt swishing at her knees. She seemed to sense his attention and turned to look at him, her lips parted in a faintly ironic smile that revealed faultlessly white teeth. Mick found it impossible to hold the gaze of those deep brown eyes and looked away, feeling the colour rise to his cheeks in a mixture of anger and shame. He knew he couldn't depend on Graham or Steve to do it all for him now, it was up to him to make the moves. But there was plenty of time for that. He didn't want to force conversation with inane questions that would only make the silence even more unbearable. It was much better to simply let things take their natural course and wait and see how they turned out.

In front Graham and Steve were swapping stories about work for the girls' benefit, and Mick felt that was something else he'd missed out on too. He was surprised that Nina was hanging back beside him instead of being part of the main group where he would have thought she'd have been more at home. More his luck to have been lumbered with the one with wobbly buttocks and a horsey laugh who was hanging on Steve's every word. Maybe ... He looked at her again and found it much easier to hold her regard.

"Have you been here long?" he found himself asking unexpectedly.

"No, we've only just come," Nina replied. Mick wondered if there was a note of relief in her voice.

"So you haven't been on any of the machines yet," he went on, surprised at his audacity.

"We were going to go on the big wheel when we met you," she told him. Ahead the ferris wheel loomed large over their heads, its multicoloured lights scribing out a giant circle in the darkness.

"That seems to be where we're heading now," he assured her.

They joined the queue behind their friends, and when it was their turn Mick helped Nina into the rocking seat, which was either very cramped for two people or else she deliberately left him too little room, forcing him to sit with his leg pressed tight against her thigh. The wheel started moving with a sudden jerk and a squeal from Nina, and then they were arcing up into the sky, the glittering fairground sinking away like an airport seen from an ascending aeroplane. The rest of the group disappeared behind them over their heads, first Graham and one of the girls and then Steve with the other two, the horsey one somehow having managed to squeeze in to get three in a seat. They reached the top of the circle and hung there for an instant before plunging down towards the ground at an ever increasing speed, only to be whisked back up again at the last moment. Nina gripped Mick's arm for reassurance and he covered her hand protectively with his own. She glanced at him as though startled by the touch, but seeing the laughter in his face her expression also relaxed. The big wheel finally came to rest, and as they stepped down from the swinging seat Mick gave Nina his hand for support. She took it gratefully, gripping it with firm, slender fingers and continuing to hold it once they were back on solid ground. Mick felt a tingling sensation flowing up his arm, and a sense of well-being and achievement washed briefly over him.

"Where do you want to go now?" he asked her as they strolled along.

"What about the roller coaster?" she suggested, already pulling him in that direction. Mick caught the devilish gleam in her eye that was as good as a challenge and guided her through the throng of people towards the rolling contours of the switchback.

As their little trolley was hauled steadily up to the top of the run Mick hesitantly put his arm around Nina's shoulders, and to his surprise she snuggled

up to him. He looked down at her upturned face and bent to kiss her parted waiting lips. As he savoured her taste time seemed to stand still. Steve and Graham and the others were all forgotten. Fleetingly he remembered past years when he'd gone to the fair with his two friends and been stuck with the ugly sister while they walked off with the winnings. This time he had won, this time he'd found a girl who responded to him for who he was, who -

Suddenly the trolley crested the rise and plunged down the first precipitous slope, jerking Mick back to reality. Beside him Nina shrieked as her stomach made an unexpected lunge for her throat, and Mick had to steady her whilst she recovered. No sooner had he done so than they were speeding upwards again, insides straining at the abrupt change in direction. They were more prepared for the next descent, and this time their cries were more of enjoyment than fear and sudden surprise. By the time the trolley eventually coasted to a halt at the bottom of the run the coquettish twinkle was back in Nina's eyes, although her face was still rather flushed. Mick deliberately rose to the bait.

"Ghost train?" he asked, but it was more of a statement than a question. She nodded silently and reached for his hand, but Mick slipped his arm around her waist and held her close as they walked, excited by the contact of her firm yet slightly yielding body.

From without the ghost train was a gaping maw of ominous darkness, decorated round the outside with paintings of dancing skeletons, leering demons and expectant vampires peering out from under haloes of pitch-black bats and swathes of dusty cobwebs. Undaunted they paid their money and got into the little cart that waited to carry them to their doom. Scarcely had they settled themselves in their seat than they were shot forward into the gloom. A few seconds passed and then a sudden swarm of bats swooped low over their heads, making them duck reflexively and raise protective arms to their faces. They hurtled towards a coffin laid across their path, the lid slowly opening and Count Dracula emerging, only to swerve aside at the last moment and dart through a doorway into a chamber where bony withered arms groped blindly for them as they went by. Nina gasped and clung to Mick as a manic skeleton stepped out to bar their way, only to disappear from sight as they passed. The procession of horrors continued as the little cart rattled and jolted on its way, so that when they emerged at last into the glare of the fairground lights, blinding after the dimness and gloom they had just been through, they were forced to screw up their staring eyes and loosen their panic stricken grips on each other. Weak-kneed and pale they got out of the cart, and when Mick held Nina to him he felt her body trembling. He kissed her again, longer and deeper than before.

"Hey! I've just thought!" he exclaimed, breaking away suddenly. Nina looked at him in puzzlement. "We haven't been on the dodgems yet! How on earth can you go to the fair and not go on the dodgems? Come on!"

Without waiting for a reply he started to lead Nina through the crowds at a half-run. She tried to slow him down, to tell him to stop this mad traverse, but either he was ignoring her or else could not hear her over the sound of his own voice yelling for her to go faster. His sudden obsessive enthusiasm seemed to give him great strength, so that Nina was barely able to keep her balance, unable to avoid colliding with people as they barged past or to break the grip that impelled her.

After what appeared to be the second round tour of the fairground, Nina suddenly found that they had stopped at the dodgem rink. Mick went to get some change for the cars, and Nina took advantage of the brief respite to try and tidy herself up. She brushed sweaty locks of hair out of her face and looked down at her feet. Her new shoes were muddy and stained, her ankles raw where they had rubbed. Further up part of her dress hung limply where it had been ripped on a child's pram. Anger welled up in her and made her want to cry, but she fought back the tears stubbornly. Mick returned and she let him lead her to one of the cars, wanting to give him another chance. He had seemed such a nice boy once they had got talking, and yet ...

"Hey look! There's Steve and Graham!" cried Mick jubilantly, and the dodgem lurched awkwardly into motion. The fairground span round in a blur as Mick turned the car to attack. It sped forward and then there was a sickening thump that threw Nina sideways in her seat.

"Yee-hay!" Mick shouted triumphantly, already manoeuvreing the car for another onslaught. "They don't call me the Artful Dodger for nothing you know!" There was another concussive impact, two-fold this time as Graham and Steve came in from each side.

"Mick ..." Nina tried to attract Mick's

attention but he was oblivious to her. She sat forgotten by his side, thrown about in all directions, conscious that he had pledged his heart to another cause. The rink ground to a halt to let people in and out of the cars, and Mick dived into his pocket for another coin. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that the seat beside him was empty, and when he looked up he was just in time to see Nina's back disappear into the crowds outside the rink. What he didn't see were the tears of anger and disappointment that now flowed unchecked and unheeded down her cheeks. He pushed the coin into the slot and waited for the current to be switched back on, planning his course of action in advance to get the best possible advantage over his rivals.

He moved off with an electric crackle from the pickup and a shout that was more like a warcry. He rammed an unsuspecting car from behind, then wheeled to face an attack from his own rear. Then it was on to slide broadside into someone else, quickly backing out of the way to expose them to a charge that was aimed at him. When the coin ran out he put another in, and when that expired it was followed by another and then another from his hoard of change. All the while he sang his battlehymn like a berserker:

"The Artful Dodger! No-one catches the Artful Dodger!"

Eventually there was no-one left on the rink but him, yet he went about attacking the empty cars as though they were training mannequins. His dodgem rolled to a halt once more and he pushed in yet another coin, waiting impatiently to be off again.

"Okay sonny. That's your lot for tonight. Time to go home." Mick looked up and saw the cashier from the change desk standing beside him.

"What, no more?" he pleaded.

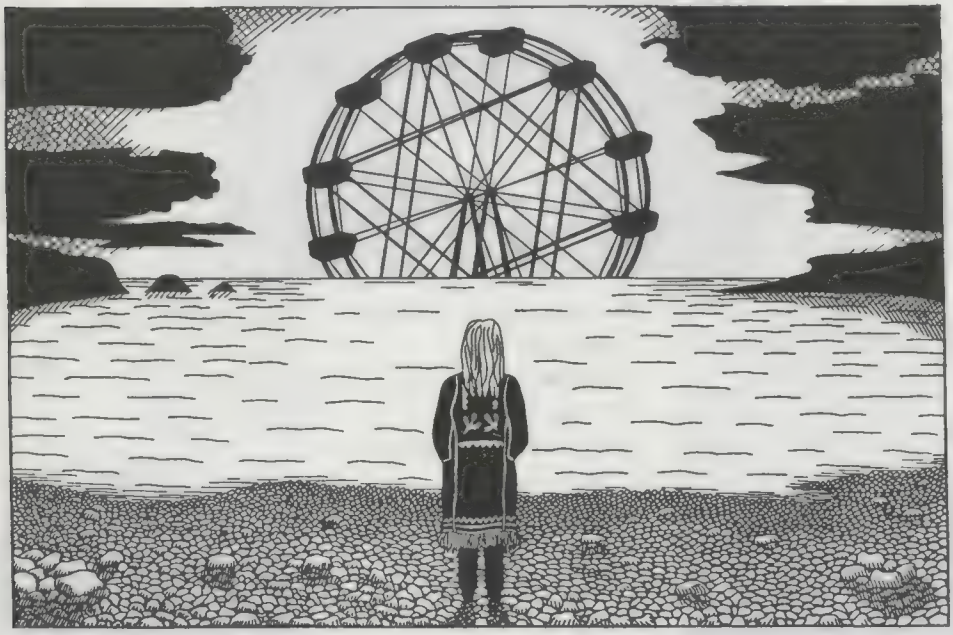
"No, we've got to pack this lot up and be on the move first light tomorrow," the man told him. As if to support his statement lights started to flicker and then go out with the finality of a switched-off life-support machine.

Mick lifted himself out of his seat as though all his energy had been drained out of him. First Nina, now the fairground was leaving him.

"Don't look so down," said the man. "We'll be back again. See you then, eh?"

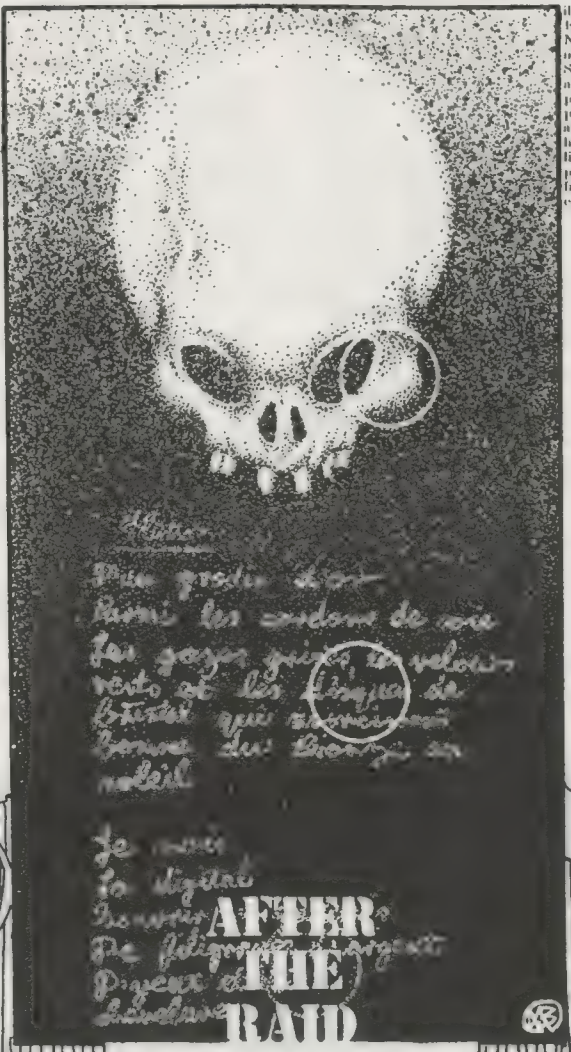
"Yeah," replied Mick as he shuffled away. "See you next year."

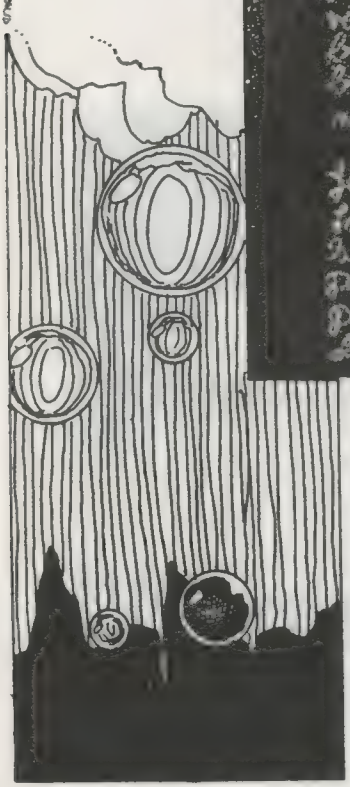
THE END

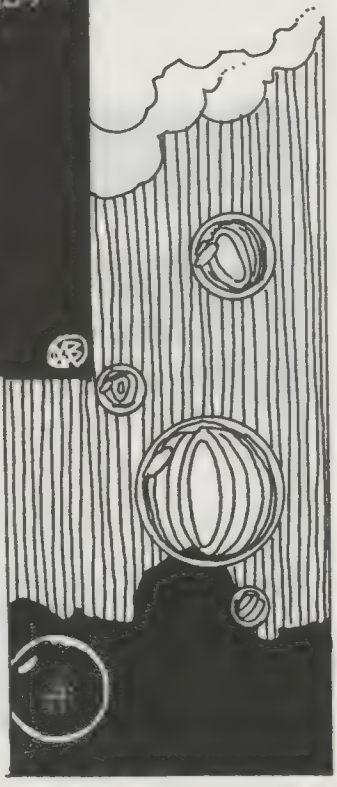


# ANDREW DARLINGTON

**Rimbaud,** JEAN NICOLAS ARTHUR (1854-91). Belgian poet. Born at Charleville, Ardennes, Oct. 20, 1854, he went to Paris in 1871, and, with several remarkable poems already to his credit, became known to Paul Verlaine (q.v.). After the rupture with Verlaine, 1873, Rimbaud travelled in England, Germany, and Italy, 1875, and then in the East Indies. After a tour of Europe with a circus troupe, he spent his later years as a trader at Harrar, Abyssinia, until illness forced him to return to Europe. He died at Marseilles on Nov. 10, 1891. Rimbaud's works include the prose volumes, Une Saison en Enfer, 1873, Les Illuminations, 1886, and his complete poems were published in 1895. He produced comparatively few poems, and these only in his youth, but had great influence on the Symbolist movement; such unique poems as the Bâteau Ivre, or the famous Voyelles sonnet, reflect his eccentric and puzzling personality.



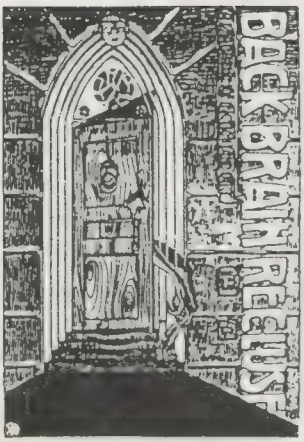



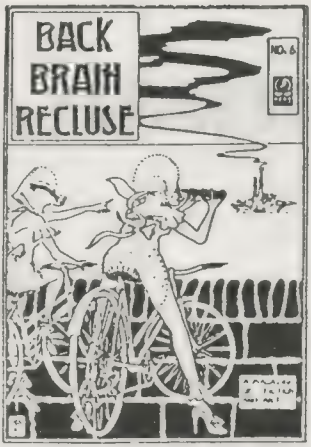


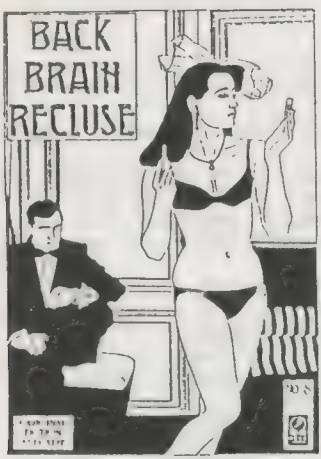
After the raid we emerged
to watch the
glass capsules settling like
silt over the city,
and to search out survivors.
We found no-one
but Rimbaud
dancing to
unheard music
on the
street corner.

PLEASE SEE THE BOOK "LES ILLUMINATIONS" BY ARTHUR RIMBAUD

# BACK ISSUES






#5 : Andy Darlington, Matt Brooker, Ray Jon, Breda Sweeney, John Light, Jon Daunt, Albert Russo, Don Webb, H.R. Felgenhauer, Sam Bayley, Steve Sneyd, D'Israeli and Kaiser Bill.

#6 : Don Webb, Simon Clark, Michael Moorcock, SMS, t. Winter-Damon, Matt Brooker, Alan Stewart, Wayne Rile Williams, Anne Dyer, Mark Iles, Ray Jon, and Kaiser Bill.

#7 : **MICHAEL MOORCOCK SPECIAL ISSUE:** Exclusive interview with Michael Moorcock, Jerry Cornelius stories by Steve Sneyd, Chris Reed and Andy Darlington, lyrics by Moorcock, artwork by SMS, Matt Brooker and Kaiser Bill.

#8 : Steve Sneyd, Wayne Rile Williams, Mark Iles, John Light, Wayne Allen Sallee, Ray Jon, Geoff Stevens, Jouni Waarakangas, Paul Roland, SMS, Michael Cobley, Matt Brooker and Kaiser Bill.

ISSUES #5 - #7 : 60p each inc. P&P.

ISSUE #8 : 70p each inc. P&P.

Send CHEQUES/POSTAL ORDERS only please to:

**BACK BRAIN RECLUSE.** CHRIS REED. Oakleigh, 16 Somersall Lane, Somersall, Chesterfield, Derbyshire.

See page 6 for Overseas Prices.

# Steppenwolf

## Anne Dyer

By the pale glow of the Firelights overhead in the night sky the house seemed to have a distinct aura, especially at one end where the hollow of the partly collapsed roof seemed to act as a collecting basin for the orange-mauve luminescence.

Grenan advanced slowly, using Pandora's superior senses to inform him of possible danger: the she-dog went ahead of him, sniffing for life with eyes, ears and nose. They padded quietly across the remains of a garden, completely lost in the natural foliage which had grown unhindered for so long. Grenan stopped by a window and put his head through the glassless opening.

"Hello? Does anybody live here?"

He called out merely to attract the inhabitant's attention: Pandora's keen sense of smell had already informed him that the house was occupied, and by one person only. Grenan tensed slightly as Pandora's ears detected the sound of movement within, and traced the approach of the noise towards them; he was prepared for the appearance of the figure in front of him a few moments later.

"Who are you?"

The person was standing back from the window so that the face was in shadow, but Grenan recognised the voice as that of a woman. A shotgun was pointed at him from the hip, although it looked too old and too rusty to be serviceable. He took several paces back, however, if only to make the woman feel more secure.

"My name is Grenan. I was looking for somewhere to pass what remains of the night."

"And the dog?" The gun jerked towards Pandora.

"She stays with me. We travel together." Grenan paused for a moment, then added as if as an afterthought: "I have food ..."

The gun was lowered slightly as the woman relaxed.

"All right. Come round to the front. I will let you and the dog in." She disappeared from the window.

The other side of the house was covered by a dense network of unchecked creeper, its leaves gently swaying in a breeze too light to be felt by Grenan. There was a sound of old bolts being drawn back and a wooden door groaned slowly open.

Grenan waited inside the door whilst the woman fumbled to light an ancient oil lamp, and as the yellow light flared up in the small room, illuminating the woman's face for the first time, Grenan was astonished to see that she was barely more than a girl. His surprise was communicated to Pandora, who was unsure how to interpret it.

**- What is matter, brothermine? You feel fear?**

Grenan reached down and gently rubbed behind Pandora's ear, calming her nerves and thus his own.

The girl led the way into the next room, holding the lamp out in front of her. Arranged around a low table were the remains

of a three piece suite, now worn right through to show the innards of the cushions. Along the walls of the room Grenan could see various bundles and packages, but the light from the lamp was too dim to reveal more than that. In one corner, where the ceiling had disappeared, the glow of the Firelights through the collapsed area of roof illuminated the ashes of a cooking fire. Nearby Grenan could distinguish a pile of assorted pieces of firewood.

The girl motioned to Grenan to sit, and he lowered himself carefully into one of the ancient armchairs. Placing the lamp on the low table, the girl sat opposite Grenan in the other armchair. She stared at him with unashamed curiosity, ignoring Pandora lying by his side. For his part, Grenan took the opportunity to look at the girl: she was slim and passably good-looking, but a lack of food tugged at her cheeks, making her seem haggard and older. Grenan could see now why his mention of food had persuaded her to let him stay in the house.

Her inspection over, the girl said, "You said you had food, but I see no pack. If you have tricked me -" She reached down for the shotgun beside her chair. There was a glint in her eye that told Grenan that she must be very, very hungry.

"I have no need for a pack," Grenan replied. "Pandora will go and catch us something now."

The she-dog rose to her feet and ambled towards the door, then stopped and cocked her head at Grenan.

**- You fancy rabbit, brothermine? Some not far.**

**- Whatever comes to hand first. But quickly. Our friend has an empty stomach.**

Pandora slipped silently out of the lamplight.

The girl spoke again, brushing her hair away from her eyes. "Your dog won't catch anything. This place is dead." She tossed her head back in contempt. "My traps have stayed empty for days."

Grenan chose to ignore the girl's criticism. "What's your name?"

The girl hesitated before replying. Her eyes flashed for a moment as if she resented being asked. "My name is Ana."

"How long have you lived alone here?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "About seven years since they took my mother away."

"And before then?"

Another shrug. "I don't know. Perhaps I was ten or eleven."

"What happened to your mother?" Grenan leaned forward in his chair. Ana was beginning to relax slightly now.

"We were travelling, the three of us. I can't remember where we'd come from or where we were going. Then we met those men and they killed my father. They took my mother, but said I was too young to be of use. I found this house and stayed here since."

Suddenly Ana lost her dreamy look and stopped speaking, the hostile expression returning to her face.

"I don't think your dog is going to find us any food," she sneered after a moment. "I think you were trying to trick me after all." She reached again for the old shotgun beside her.

"You won't need to use that," Grenan replied hastily. "You must be patient. After all -" he smiled ironically "- you did say this place was dead."

Ana said nothing but reluctantly left her gun where it lay.

There was uneasy silence for several minutes until Pandora noiselessly re-entered the room. Two dead rabbits hung limply from her jaws, and she dropped them with a thud on to the low table between Ana and Grenan.

**- Here, brothermine. Two enough?**

**- Well done sister. Good job you're back - our friend was getting restless.**

Ana picked up the rabbits without a word and set about preparing the cooking fire. "Bring some wood," she ordered Grenan, and lit a small brand from the lamp. As the flames caught hold she skinned the meat with expert speed, though Grenan thought he could see her trembling at the prospect of eating.

Later, when Grenan and Pandora had gone to sleep in the next room, Ana sat alone over the fading coals of the cooking fire. Her pensive face was lit from below by their dim red glow, and from above by the ever-present Firelights. This was no ordinary man, she reasoned, who had arrived at her house that night. A strange, mysterious man with an equally strange way of communicating with the she-dog forever at his side. She felt drawn in an inexplicable way to this man who, although she knew only his name, had drawn her deepest secrets from her without her hardly realising it was happening. She had tried to hold back, but it had come out nevertheless as she talked to the first person she had met since the marauders had destroyed her family. Silently, without knowing the full reason why, she slipped out of her tattered clothes and walked through into the room where Grenan and Pandora were sleeping.

What she saw by the Firelight shining through the open window made her want to cry out in terror. On the floor in front of her lay a flowing amorphous creature that constantly changed in shape and form. Now the bodies of man and dog were separate; now the body of one had the head and limbs of the other; now the two were one entity at once human and canine; everchanging, intermingling.

With a gasp Ana turned and darted back to the other room, took up the old shotgun and returned, knocking heavily against the door jamb with her shoulder in her panic as she re-entered. Raising her gun to aim, she remembered the stories her father used to tell when she was young, of how the Firelights had started to flow across the sky after the Catastrophe, of how strange men had walked the Earth endowed with unnatural powers, and how these Demons had been purged by the Pure as traitors to Mother Nature.

This was one such Demon in front of her now, and it was her duty to erase it from the surface of the Earth, as her parents and grandparents had done so many times before. She held her breath and tightened her finger on the rusty trigger.

**The excitement of the chase made Grenan's veins tingle. His veins? Pandora's veins? It did not matter in the oneness of the dream, brother and sister united in the same thought, the same action, the same experience. Pandora's swift legs carried them both after their prey, which her delicate senses had discovered so easily not long before. He could see the bobbing white tail in front, darting from side to side, coming ever closer, could smell the scent thick in his nostrils. Then he was upon the rabbit, his teeth closing over the neck of the struggling animal. He tensed his jaw muscles, felt the cracking of bones, the sticky sweet taste of warm fresh blood on his tongue. The animal hung limply from his mouth now, but the sensation remained, a sense of victory, euphoric elation at the presence of Death. There was a loud, distant thud, and slowly the dream dispersed, and Grenan found himself floating quickly up from the depths of sleep to where wakefulness awaited at the surface.**

As Grenan awoke, he saw Ana's ghost-white figure aiming the shotgun at him, and his heart jumped. Pandora had also sensed the danger and was on her feet. Then Grenan remembered that the age and condition of the gun posed no threat after all, but it was too late. Pandora was already leaping towards Ana, jaws open and teeth glinting in the Firelight.

**- NO PANDORA!!** Grenan shouted, but the she-dog could not hear him. Her instincts had told her to attack the danger, to protect herself and her brother, and her mind was closed to all but that goal.

Grenan watched helplessly as Pandora's giant paws connected with Ana's shoulder, bowling her over. The naked girl had time only to draw breath before Pandora's powerful jaws tore away her throat, so that the scream came out as a gentle sigh.

**Again Grenan felt the rending of flesh, the flowing of lifeblood warm inside his mouth, the sense of victory, the euphoria of the kill ...**

Pandora turned away from the body almost immediately, her death joy gone.

**- There, brothermine, danger past. Can hurt us no more.**

But her pride turned to doubt when she sensed Grenan's sadness.

**- What is matter, brothermine? You not happy danger gone ...?**

Grenan shrugged his shoulders. "It doesn't matter any more, Pandora," he said aloud. "It's too late to worry."

He looked at Ana for a moment, the gaping red gash in her neck dark against the whiteness of the rest of her body, then he stepped over and went into the next room. He took a long thin piece of wood and laid it in the embers of the fire, blowing until the coals glowed bright red and a small flame appeared at the end of the stick; he waited for the flame to take and then removed the brand from the fire.

He went through the house room by room, setting light to anything that would burn. The timbers were dry, and it was not long before the building had become a raging inferno.

Grenan realised that by Ana's creed she had been killed by a 'Demon', and so the only way for her soul to be brought to rest was by cremation. This was the least he could do for her now.

He stood in the neglected garden with Pandora by his side, bathed in the yellow of the flames before him, and the flowing orange-mauve of the Firelights overhead. Soon the flames were licking up from the roof of the house to merge with their brothers in the night sky, paving a fiery road to lead Ana's tormented spirit to freedom.

THE END

# ... BESIDE THE SEASIDE, BESIDE THE SEA ...

## SIMON CLARK

Three fifths of the Earth's surface are covered by ocean. From sand beach shallows to icy depths, where a layer of salt water seven miles thick covers submerged mountain ranges, valleys, and the rusting hulks of sea choked ships. The sea: the salt water womb of life. yet, an alien world of kelp jungles, silver sided fish, stony shelled molluscs and boiling, steam winded whales.

Temperatures vary from a blood warm surface in equatorial regions to the ice thick waters of the arctic and antarctic. The two trade streams of water. Invisible rivers of warm penetrate the cold. And icy fingers push deeply into the body of warmer seas. Along these currents drift the careless aquatic passengers of the oceans. Jelly-fish, weed, seed pods, the flotsam and jetsam - the living and the dead.

In sweep the currents, with their bobbing free-riders, eventually reaching some coast to deliver their cargoes in the curling foam of surf.

The coastal town hung over the beach, almost lapping the water's edge. It presented a facade of brightly coloured lights, pulsing their lotus eater's message into the evening. Crowds drifted along the promenade, occasionally caught in the eddies of smoke-filled bingo halls or drawn by the lure of an arcade, packed with whistling, banging, singing video games.

Pub doors rattled open, yawning wide like thirsty mouths to admit a flood of bodies through dry throats, filling empty glass and disco glittered bellies. The first record of the evening belched through the freshly beer-stained air and out into the dusk.

Where the land meets the sea. In the scummy wet divide of ocean and dry land. The tide unloads its deep cargo and retreats from the resort's pleasure machine, sliding back in a rattle of pebbles. And by the sea-bitten wood breakwater the pall-bearer of the ocean collects and abandons its dead. Wet strands of brown leathery kelp, cracked shells, starfish; an oil-matted cormorant; the screw shredded remains of a dolphin; the severed head of a conger eel and the scattered fragments of ten million corpses.

"I can't," said the girl, gazing out to where a darkening sky was fusing with a darkening sea. She sighed. "Not all night."

The boy wrapped his arm about her waist. "Why not? You're not back at school till next Monday."

Her voice was soft: "I know but ... you know?"

He pulled her close. "There's only me in t'caravan till Thursday. Come on ... And we'll go up to t'Cavern disco by t'harbour, tonight."

The girl stretched; a decision made. "I don't know. I'd like to." And she began to walk towards the life-boat slipway. Excited, he sensed her resolution. "Me dad left half a bottle of whiskey in t'caravan. We'll 'ave that. He won't mind ... Want a cig?"

As they faded into uncertain silhouettes against the coloured lights of the town something stirred at the water's edge. It quivered and trembled like a stranded fish, gulping the briny air. Wide blank eyes blinked, watered and then watched. The cars and buses stopped and started along the sea front. Some scooters crackled by. Although unseen, it sensed the great presence of the castle ruins perched on the solid mass of rock which dominated the town.

With waves washing her feet she rose and wavered as if unsure of her balance. Then the girl, her feet wetly padding the sand, walked up the beach towards the town. The promenade was busy - people sniffing out inviting pubs, clubs and theatres. The machines still sang their electric songs but the candy floss stalls, sweetshops and children's amusements had closed for the night. Fish and chip papers scurried across the road, occasionally folding about her ankles. She paused by the red shell of a war-time mine, now meekly collecting pennies for a good cause.

Baring his teeth, the man with the camera and scrabbling fur ball of monkey approached her - "Hello luv. Lovely evening." - and

threw the monkey at her. Screaming, it kicked, bouncing back on to the man's arm. Tiny black fingers clutched at his lapels and tie. "Petro! Petro. Go to the nice girl, Petro." The monkey squeaked. "Have your picture taken with Petro, luv. Now move that hair away, we can't see your face. Petro, go to the nice lady." The monkey clung to him crying. Camera in one hand, he prised the limpet capuchin from him with the other. "It's okay luv. He wouldn't 'arm a - bloody hell! The sod bit me." The monkey scrambled up on to his shoulders and the man sucked his bloody finger, hissing threats. When he looked up the girl had gone. Three giggling girls, pink flushed with Martini, were crossing the road. "Hello me darlings. Lovely evening." He threw the monkey at them. It obligingly cuddled into the scented arms of the redhead.

Shellfish stalls, selling cold bite-size morsels of salted gristle and muscle. Hamburger, hot-dog stalls expelling hot breaths of sausage, onion and frying smells. More arcades. And as the money bells rang, coloured lights flashed in gratitude.

The night wind was blowing cold, flying in from the dark distances of the sea, sizzling the surf and driving the tattered paper flotsam before it. Some fastened jackets and coats, but most fell back before the chilling breeze to seek refuge in pubs and cafes.

A handful, beerful and numb, defied the cold ruffling wind and pointed out to sea where a ship was sinking. Or, perhaps, it was the street lights on the far side of the bay. Or they pointed at girls as skirts lifted in the goose-fleshing up-draught of air.

A wolf whistle. "Want a cig, luv?" Another voice: "Ave a drink of me ale."

"Dunt. He's peed in it!"

One laughed. "He's shy. He really means will you go to bed with him."

A voice cut across the babble: "Shut up, Mick! Leave t'poor lass alone. It's alright luv, don't take any notice. They're 'alf cut."

Outside the pub, she paused. A door opened and someone hurried by, dragging some of the odours and warmth of the public bar with them. Inside. Black cross-beams segregated the yellow white walls and ceiling which were hung with polished brass. A beer coloured, cigarette burn patterned carpet was beginning to fray. Blue coils of tobacco smoke twisted about the room, occasionally vibrating to the throb of the juke box in the next room. She slipped through the bar, her eyes absorbing the rows of bottles holding amber promises. A tap jetted foaming lager and the barman's finger nails and gold rings clicked against the glass. She sat at a vacant table. Two dozen voices, like waves, washed over her, submerging her beneath the bubble and hiss of words.

"Another pint of mild, Jack?"

A woman's voice soared into laughter. "You dirty beggar, Harry! He'll get 'imself shot."

Voices fused and dissolved. "I think it's a bit of sunburn. It is. We 'ad a good two hours in the park, this afternoon. I wonder if a bit of cream, you know, Nivea'll bring it out. You should've seen our Janet last year, when she got back from France. Her legs were burnt shocking. Just 'ere below the knees, covered with blisters. Like balloons filled with water."

A match flared in the smoke soaked air and wet lips suckled the stem of a pipe. "Did I tell you," said the man, "about that bloke? He lives in the same town as us. Well, one day, when he was at work, t'local vet phoned him yer see, and told him to go see him straight away. And on no account go home first. So, this bloke, wondering what's up, goes to t'vet's and sees he's got his dog, a bloody great alstation. 'What yer doing with

me dog?' he asks. T'vet tells him a neighbour saw t'dog choking in t'garden so he took t'dog to t'vet. And t'vet got some tweezers and pulled out of t'dog's throat three fingers - human fingers. They were stuck, choking t'dog. So this bloke phones t'police and tells them to go to his house. Anyway, when they get there, they find t'back door open. They searched t'house and found a man in t'bedroom wardrobe. It was a burglar. He'd broken in. Not known there was a dog till it went for him. Only way he could get away was to hide in t'wardrobe. But t'bloody dog got 'odd of his hand first, and had three of his fingers."

A crash - splintering glass - jolted the bar silent. "That's one way o' getting art o' washing up," observed the man, his dry smile exposing the yellow chips of his teeth.

"Oh, you and your lip, Freddy. Another quip like that and you're barred, love," retorted the barman as he kicked the pieces into a corner.

Another voice was raised, lyrical with alcohol. "A few months ago ... five or six or so, I heard about someone who lives near us. His wife bought this big piece of steak. Like that. Big as a plate. Anyway, she cuts it in half. Puts one piece in t'fridge and has t'other for her dinner. Later that day she's feelin' off it. Poorly. So she tells husband to get t'steak and cook it for his supper. He goes to t'fridge, opens it. And t'meat. Piece of steak fills t'plate again. It's hanging over t'side. And when he looked at it, he saw it was just ... just moving, like shivering. They took it to t'Council offices and they found it was cancer. Cancer in t'meat. And they found where it'd touched some sausages it had infected them and they were bursting out, splitting t'skins. Just think of that. That poor woman'd eaten t'meat. And it was just a piece of cancer ... living cancer."

The night was cold and still when she left the pub. A few people still walked along the promenade, but they hardly strolled. there was purpose and direction in their stride.

In the distance the saline hiss of the sea was subdued. Above, the sky was clearing and the light disk of the moon duplicated itself in darkened shop windows. To her left, stone steps ascended into the darkness. Twelve steps up a lad, his face white as lard. He squirted something from a yellow tube into a polystyrene cup. Then, cupping his hands around it as if warming them, he raised the cup and rested it against his top lip. He breathed deeply, drawing great lungfuls of cold air and fumes into his chest, burning his nose and throat and filling his lungs with fire. A fire that flooded through his body to numb his arms and legs and his soul. Then he dropped back on to his elbows as the solvent fire dissolved his brain.

Somebody coughed and spat. "Want a chip, luv?" Two men carrying bouquets of greasy newspaper stood by her side.

"Yer can do better than that, Shillies. 'Ave a bit of his fish. Best bit of cod in Scabs." The gleaming white fragment of fish was clutched in his oil glossed fingers. "She looks foreign to me. Look ... she can't understand a word yer say."

The other tapped his head knowingly. "No, I think she's a bit ... in the head. Even so, she don't look bad."

A soft laugh padded into the night. "God knows. Yer can't see her face for all that hair."

The other's voice dropped to a whisper. "Do you look at t'mantlepiece when yer poking t'fire?" Throwing away the screwed up newspapers they each took an arm and led her up a darkly winding side street packed with cars. It was silent. Black windows of houses, like blind eyes, stared hard against the night.

"Here'll do. It's t'back yard of that old

chippie. No one'll see us." Into the high walled yard they guided her, then drew her towards a bed sized patch of balding grass. "It's my turn first this time, Shillies." Shillies relinquished his hold on her and moved out of sight behind a shed of sagging boards.

The other pulled her close and her long arms wrapped around him like the white rubber tentacles of an octopus. She opened her mouth as he bent towards her. The silver grey of her tongue moved and her teeth were a tightly packed row of blue black mussels set in white flesh. The shells opened. Mother of pearl flowers. Hypnotised. His lips met her water-cold flesh. Salt pricked his tongue, and the rush and hiss of the sea was in his ears. Bitingly cold brine flushed through him, cascading into his lungs. His mouth jerked open and then was as still and as silent as his cold, dead heart.

Shillies started when she appeared at his side. Softly he called his friend's name. His voice failed. She was turning her face to his. A strange flat immobile face, the face of ... No. No. It was the face of a girl. Her fingers, no, the wet sucker tentacles of a squid, touched his lips - and pressed. He could not resist as they pushed into his mouth, probing his tongue. His mouth yawned wider and wider as the chill hand, then wrist, slipped into his mouth and smoothly slid into his throat. No air reached his lungs as the arm, as long as death, continued its tight slide through the core of his body. Eternally, worming its way along the winding path of his stomach. He could still feel its cold unceasing passage through his salt water being as he lay face down in a sea of newspaper balls, chip trays, wooden forks and crushed coca-cola cans.

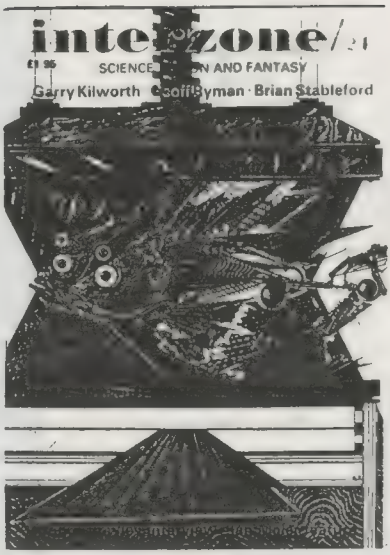
Where the land meets the sea. The silk surf rolled up the beach towards the town, and waves moved across a crackling band of pebbles to swirl and bubble about her feet. Then, calmly, she stepped forward into the roaring darkness of the nighttime ocean.

Three fifths of the world's surface are covered by water. Should the polar ice caps melt then the sea level would rise dramatically, flooding many hundreds of square miles of dry land.

Where the sea meets the shore. The ocean surged up the beach, rushing, tumbling, cascading, falling, rising towards dry land.

The tide had turned.

THE END




No 21 Autumn 1987

Original fiction by:

Eric Brown
Garry Kilworth
Ken Wisman
Brian Stableford
Geoff Ryman

Illustrated by:

SMS
Ian Miller
Russ Tudor
Tina Horner

Interview with John Crowley

SUBSCRIPTIONS (4 issues / year)

UK: £7:50
US: $13 (sea mail) or $16 (air mail)
Elsewhere : £8:50

To: 124 OSBORNE ROAD, BRIGHTON BN1 6LU.
ENGLAND.

**interzone**

EUROPE'S ENGLISH LANGUAGE SF FANTASY

MAGAZINE.

# THE FALCON

The falcon strikes
The birds fall down
The master lifts a languid arm
Accepts the hunter, next the prey
And then he rides away

The thunder breaks
The lightning flares
Some drops of blood upon a stone
Are touched and thinned by rain
A fading memory of pain

A sword is pointed
At the sky
A silhouette, a silent giant
Moves slowly through the roaring day
In pursuit of nameless game

First the hunter, then the game
Turn and turn and turn again:
Killers, killed and killing
Look at all the blood they're spilling
And the victims seem so willing:
Giving pain and seeking pain
Turn and turn and turn again
Stabbing, wounding, rending
No effort made at mending
Warfare without ending ...

# Michael Moorcock

The giant has found
The hunter now
The thunder fades, the falcon stirs
In hood and traces nervously
Smells danger building like a wind

A sword is raised
A horse is wheeled
The falcon is released on high
And hovers on the crest of fear
Then stoops at violent eyes

The giant is blind
The master's prone
The falcon listens to their groans
Then spreads her wings and turns away
Into the dying day

First the hunter, then the game
Turn and turn and turn again:
etc.

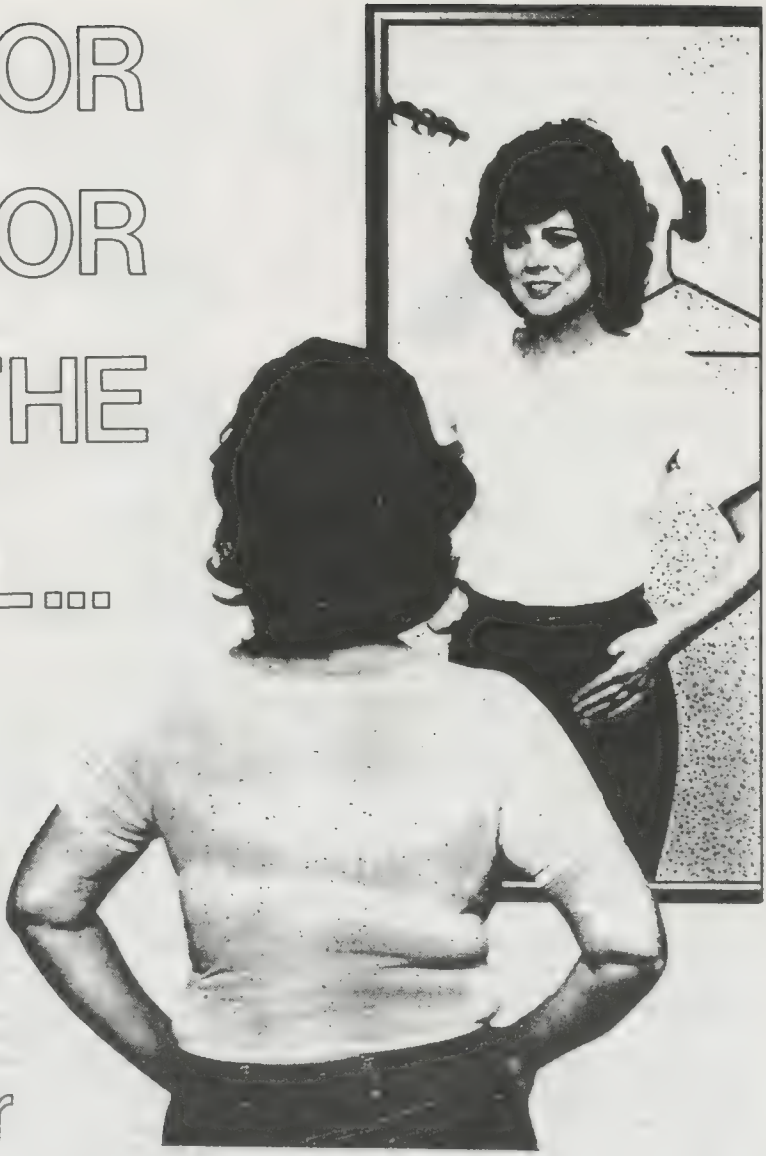
Lyrics (c) Michael Moorcock 1985

# FLICKERING BLUE EXTREME/
# Phantom Visitations of the Mermaid's Inn

fog whispers the fear-scent of blood and frost
along the twisted alleyways of waterfront
death whispers behind bolted shutters
tangled breath shudders of forbidden ecstasy in violated graveyards
the climax of december snow and tombstones
nightspasms of belladonna lust
sea slaps unseen hulls  perhaps suggesting undulations
rhythms of coupling flesh
a dark wind sets the rusted chains and weathered shingle to rattling
like the fetters of damned souls
furtive rappings on the iron-shod door
a bloated eye appears  carbon dioxide solid welcome
whispers heavy with silver and conspiracy
retraction of the bar
a clicking as of clockwork overwound
the yawning gullet of famine hollow desperation
lost sailors beyond hope on drifting rafts
FLICKERING BLUE EXTREME
lathered sweat  opium and rum  absinthe and hashish
rumours of a crucifixion drew forth an anxious crowd tonight
a butterfly of black lace  pinned upon the pitted beams
three time-yellowed skulls line the mantelpiece (stained and polished
like a row of cherished meerschaum pipebowls)
what untold infamies they certainly have witnessed!
house legend names them as the vestiges
of Donatien-François  Caligula  and Vlad
prussic acid and a savouring of bitter almond
moonlight twitches on a symphiny of scalpels
a chorusing in high soprano
blue-white arcing  the crackling of galvanic current
the stage door slams on shattered fingers
BLUE
FLICKERING BLUE EXTREME
blue as the cobalt bottle warns
blue as the inner eye inspects a vein
blue as a kitchen faucet pumping like a high ace trump
BLUE
FLICKERING BLUE EXTREME
the velvet drapes sway slowly open to reveal the masque
Polyphemus roars the anguish of good wine and olive
Procrustes and poetic justice merge  endlessly reflected
in fireside mirrors upon walls and ceiling
Philomela opens her mouth in accusation of Tereus the covetous
Tantalus has set his spread before the fallen gods of earth
Tydeus scoops out dainty tidbits with a silver spoon
so delicate
so elaborately art nouveau
Phantom Visitations of the Mermaid's Inn
so slowly
the night expires
with
satiated signs

**t. Winter-Damon**

# MIRROR MIRROR ON THE WALL...



## Anne Dyer

Christine James was cold. The October night air chilled her bare flesh and she shivered uncomfortably. The involuntary movement hurt her bruised body and she winced with the pain. Soon, however, the cold would numb her skin and the pain would go away. She was already losing the feeling in her feet and hands. She tried to shift her position but her muscles were cramped with inaction and movement was painful: it was more comfortable to stay still and relax on the cushion of dry leaves beneath her, rather than suffer the agony of action.

Her energy was fading fast, evaporating away into the night air with the heat from her naked body. There was no chance now of

being found in the laneside ditch by some passer-by in the dark. She could only be noticed in daylight, but as hypothermia took an ever stronger grip on her she knew that dawn would be too late to help her. Without clothes in the freezing temperatures she would be dead by daybreak.

A summer morning - the pivot of her existence. Thursday 15th July, to be exact. There was nothing remarkably out of place about the occasion, but such events usually do pass unnoticed. That is why it is normally so hard to pinpoint them in hindsight, and, of course, why it is totally impossible to see them in the present.

Christine was clearing the breakfast things, and as usual her husband had left the paper on the table. She picked it up and flicked through, glancing without interest at the scandal of the gossip, the bedlam of politics. But the adverts aroused her woman's interest and she scanned them avidly for the chance of something at a reduced price. One of these adverts caught her eye and she put the paper to one side, having to wait until office hours before she could telephone.

It took Christine several attempts to get through to Pan Transcendental Industries Inc. Apparently the advert had been widely read and there was already quite a waiting list.

"Yes, next Tuesday will be fine."

She gave her name, address and telephone number, and received in return instructions as to how to get to PTI.

The pivot of Christine James' existence. Did it centre on the newspaper advertisement? Or on the telephone call, or that Tuesday's appointment? Or on Christine's inherent female sense of vanity?

Or was it a complex piece of machinery depending on all of these points?

In the foyer of the PTI building, a tall, modern edifice near the town centre, the receptionist ordered Christine to take the lift to the fifth floor, where she found a secretary already waiting.

"Good morning, Mrs. James."

"Good morning."

"Before we start, Mrs. James, there are a few things that need going over ..." The secretary handed Christine several forms of indemnity to be signed, and a short questionnaire about herself. Once these had been filled in the secretary checked them over quickly and put them down on her desk.

"Fine. If you would care to go through door 'A' over there, Mrs. James, undress and put on the smock, you will be called presently. If you have any valuables they will be quite safe with your clothes in the cubicle." The secretary indicated the door and smiled at Christine. "See you later, Mrs. James."

Inside the cubicle Christine undressed quickly, folding her clothes carefully and placing them on a chair, then put on the thin cotton smock she found hanging behind the door. Shortly the intercom over a second door crackled into life and a man's voice asked her to go through.

The next room was quite small, only about four times the size of the cubicle Christine had just left, and it made her feel slightly claustrophobic. However, the easy, confident patter of the young white-coated technician soon put her at ease.

"First of all I'll explain briefly how the process works," he began. Pointing to a large full-length mirror that lay flush to the wall in front of Christine, he continued: "Although you are looking at a totally normal reflection of yourself, this is no ordinary mirror. In the past the trick mirrors of the amusement arcades were developed to help people who were trying to lose weight. Instead of making the person look dwarfish or immensely fat or whatever, a mirror was made that could be warped at will, so that a dieter could obtain the best-looking reflection and thus know what to strive for."

He paused for a moment, running a hand through his thick black hair. "Here we've taken that development one stage further, linking a much more flexible mirror to a computer so that it knows exactly how much change, and where, is desired. Once the required reflection is obtained, the computer uses the information to perform the transformation."

The technician pulled down a small stereo-

headphone type apparatus that was hanging from the ceiling. "When you put these on, the sensors pick up your brainwaves and feed them into the computer. All you have to do is think what you want a part of you to look like, and the computer will automatically adjust the mirror for you to see the results. Once you're satisfied that you've changed all you want, give me the signal and I'll start the transformation process. Do you have any questions before we start?"

"Yes, just one thing," replied Christine. "The transformation process - does it hurt at all?"

"There is a small amount of pain involved, but nothing overly distressing. It will pass in a matter of seconds." He raised an inquisitive eyebrow but Christine had no more queries. "Fine. If you give me your smock now, Mrs. James, I'll fix up the apparatus."

Christine took off her smock and handed it to him. The technician, unembarrassed by her naked body, quickly fitted the headpiece to her temples and left the room. She saw him appear a few moments later at an observation window and give her the thumbs-up sign. Christine turned to face the mirror and set about changing the reflection in front of her. There was so many things to alter, and the technique took some getting used to, so that it took several attempts to obtain the desired effect. In the end she found it easier to fix a picture in her mind, and then adjust the altered reflection with 'verbal' commands.

Every so often she glanced nervously at the technician in his window, slightly disturbed at the thought of a complete stranger seeing her nude. However, he seemed totally unperturbed, and the idle grin on his face was not one of lust but more of amusement as she made what must have seemed to him to be the most predictable, the most common decisions. She wondered how many other 35-year-old women had gone before her to flatten their tummies, trim their waists, enlarge their breasts and change the thousand and one things that they deemed wrong with their bodies.

At last everything was done, and Christine signed to the technician that she was ready to undergo the transformation. She tensed herself in readiness and waited for the pain, but even so its suddenness caught her unawares.

It blossomed from the sensors on her temples, drove into the depths of her brain. She tried to raise her hands to her head, but her arms were locked by her sides. Her eyes were confronted insect-like by a thousand reflections of herself, as she was then and as she would be after the transformation, as though surrounded by mirrors. She wanted to scream but her voice was frozen. The agony ferreted around inside her skull, and then, satisfied that no hidden niches remained unfilled, it spread down her spine, flowing out along her limbs until it engulfed her. Her flesh felt like liquid, running away along her bones to find new lodging positions. If she could have looked down, she fancied that she would have seen little puddles of herself forming around her feet, like a snowman melting on a warm day. In front of her the reflections were as though seen through the bottom of a glass, warped and distorted, mixing and merging, the old into the new, the new into the old ...

At this point Christine must have blacked out, for the next thing she knew was that the technician was helping her back into the cubicle.

"You'll be alright in a few minutes, dear," he was saying. "It takes a short time for your body to adjust to being different."

"You told me ... You told me ... it wouldn't be so bad," Christine murmured, passing a hand across her frowning forehead as the technician guided her to a chair. She had begun to feel better already, but her body still seemed unresponsive.

"That's because most women haven't suffered as badly as you did, Mrs. James," the technician replied soothingly. "Perhaps you mind reacted against the process more than theirs, but there's no need to worry about it. It's like giving birth - you'll find it was worth all the pain in the long run."

Christine was about to ask him what he knew about having a baby, but decided there was little point as she'd never had one herself. Instead she said: "I'm okay now, thankyou, there's no need for you to stay." She looked up at him and smiled weakly.

The technician nodded. "Okay then, Mrs. James, I understand. Goodbye - and good luck." He went back into the mirror room, closing the door softly behind him.

Christine dressed slowly, and with each garment she put on it became clear that this was going to cost her more than just Pan Transcendental's fee. None of the clothes that she had worn to the clinic fitted her properly now, and even her watch-strap was too large. Glumly she realised that practically all her wardrobe would be the

same.

However, the prospect of a shopping spree in town cheered her immensely, and she came out of the cubicle with a spring in her step. When the secretary asked her if she felt alright, she was able to honestly say that she did. She signed the cheque without hesitation, and left the building full of joy and vigour, looking forward to starting a new life in a new body.

Younger, infinitely more beautiful than before, with the world as he proverbial oyster, why on earth should she need the good luck wished her by the technician? Or did he know something that she did not?

She finally returned home late in the afternoon and unpacked her purchases, pushing aside all the old clothes that were no longer any good. The expedition had gone well, and she had been grateful for the loose-fitting clothes she'd worn to the clinic, the only garments in her wardrobe that still fitted her reshaped figure.

She showered and dressed again, selecting a sleek flowing dress that suited her perfectly. Pausing to examine herself in the mirror she found her new reflection made her slightly nervous, as though an intruded had entered her bedroom. The tension passed as quickly as it had come, and she went and sat at her dressing table to apply her make-up. This was not as easy as she expected and took much longer than usual, for the contours of her face were new and unfamiliar. Finally she went downstairs again to await her husband's return from work.

Her stomach knotted up inside her as she watched the car roll up in front of the house. It had been hard keeping the secret from Carl once she had made the appointment, and now the excitement of the surprise she was going to give him had become almost unbearable. When he had locked the car and was walking to the door, Christine threw it open and ran down the path to meet him, wrapping her arms around him and kissing him full on the lips.

"Hello darling. Did you have a good day at work?" she asked afterwards, smiling up at him with perfect white teeth.

Carl said nothing for a few moments, astonishment on his face. Then he pushed Christine away suddenly, striding on up the path and into the house.

"Hey, what is this? Some kind of joke or something?" he exclaimed as Christine followed him into the living room. "Who are you anyway? What are you doing in my house?" he added, turning in the middle of the room to face her.

Christine laughed nervously, her smile forgotten. "Why, I'm your wife, of course."

"Really? You look nothing like her, so you'll have to do better than that," sneered Carl in reply. He looked dangerous, feet apart, hands on hips, obviously in no mood for arguing. This was a side of her husband Christine had never seen before, and it frightened her. Bewildered and almost crying she ran and fetched the newspaper from the kitchen. She flipped frantically through the pages until she found the advert and slammed the paper down in front of him.

"There! Read that!" she blurted, fighting back the tears that threatened to overwhelm her. "That'll tell you why I'm your wife! That'll tell you why I'm so different!" Her heart pounded in her chest and in her ears as she watched Carl read silently through the advertisement. She felt sick inside at how awfully wrong her plans had gone.

"And that's where you've been today?" asked Carl, his harsh voice cutting Christine to the bone. He held the paper up threateningly and she cringed away from him, afraid that he would beat her.

"Yes. I booked up last Thursday."

"And why didn't you tell me you were going to have this ... this operation done?"

"I wanted it to be a surprise," replied Christine, breaking down and crying openly although she knew she could expect no sympathy from her husband.

"Oh, it was a surprise alright," Carl laughed drily. "I come home from work and there's some strange dolly bird in my arms telling me my wife doesn't exist any more." He sat down heavily in an armchair. "I still can't believe you're the same woman. Every time I look up I expect to see the old you, hear your old voice."

"Don't you like the 'new me' then?" Christine asked timidly.

"I would've liked it better if we'd discussed it first. Men like to know when they're not going to see their wives again, you know." Christine flinched. Carl was scolding her like a child, deliberately humiliating her, hurting her. She buried her face in her hands as he continued. "I never hid anything from you Christine, you know

that. I shared my problems with you, and helped you with yours, and we were happy. And now you go and do this to me. I thought I could trust you, but that's changed now. When we got married we promised to believe in each other, to trust each other. You've broken that promise, I can't treat you like an equal any more. You don't look like my wife or sound like my wife now. And worst of all you don't even behave like my wife now."

This last was too much for Christine. She ran from the room, letting out a sob of despair.

That night Carl made love to her violently and forcefully, as though punishing her for making him give in to the unnatural charms of the stranger in his bed. Several times he made her cry out in pain, for she was tighter there too, and when he had finished Christine cried herself slowly to sleep.

The next morning she was roused by the sound of movement in the bedroom. Carl had found some suitcases and was starting to fill them with clothes, but he paused when he saw her sit up in the bed.

"So, the lodger awakens," he said sardonically. I was going to do this for you but as you're up you may as well do it yourself." He indicated the open wardrobe and chest of drawers he'd been emptying. You've got half an hour to pack what you want and clear out. I'll send the rest to jumble." He left the room, leaving her to gather her thoughts and her clothes into their respective piles.

For the most part, only the things she had bought the day before were of any use to her, and mercifully they went easily into a single case, together with her make-up gear and other odds and ends. As she packed she became detached from her actions. Now, in the sickening clarity of the morning she could see things only from her husband's point of view. She had betrayed him completely, betrayed all her vows as his wife. She thought briefly of begging forgiveness, but it was pointless to try and reconcile with Carl in his present mood. He owed her no loyalty now, for she was no longer his true wife. Their marriage had been wrecked with a single rash move. Twisted with guilt, Christine picked up her case and slouched downstairs.

Carl met her at the door as she was going out and resentfully thrusted some notes from his wallet at her. "That's all I've got - you spent all the rest on your damned jaunt yesterday. If you want any more you'd better think about making that investment pay and use that expensive body of yours." He left his words open to interpretation but the tone of his voice left Christine with no doubts about his meaning. Saying nothing for fear of letting her tears overcome her, Christine took the money and left the house, hearing the door slam damningly behind her.

She started walking, if only to get away from the house. What would she do now? First she must find somewhere to stay, but where? She could hardly claim on the charity of friends for they would see only a total stranger and turn her away, heedless of her stories. She had some money, but not so much that she could take a room at a hotel until she found somewhere permanent to live. Waves of despair washed over her, the self-hate for the imprudence that had caused all this originally. She wandered on, heedless of direction.

Presently the emotion cooled and Christine became more rational. Finding herself near the city centre she headed for the information bureau by the railway station. There she found the name of a cheap bed and breakfast that was well within her means, and once installed there her thoughts turned to income and employment. She ought to be able to find a temping bureau quite easily, but then she realised she had only minimal qualifications and she hadn't typed since she was at school.

Then Christine remembered what Carl had told her that morning and her spirits rose. With her perfect body she would have no trouble becoming a model. She found some numbers in a paper, but every agency she phoned was only interested in women with previous modelling experience. Each time the reason was the same: a flood of new talent had suddenly filled the agency's books so they were now only interested in women with established modelling careers.

Christine went back to the paper with lowered sights and rummaged through the classified section. Eventually she found a photographer in need of a model, and arranged to visit his studio the following morning. She felt disillusioned that things had not gone as well as she'd hoped, but at least with the photographer she might be able to get the experience the agencies were

looking for. Her spirits rose at the thought. With a start Christine realised it was already late afternoon and she was suddenly very hungry, not having eaten all day. She went up to her room and changed, but when she tidied her hair in front of the mirror a cold chill ran down her spine. She shivered and turned away, then left her lodgings in search of a cheap meal.

The following morning Christine was up early to prepare herself for the interview, but her bubbling confidence was damped suddenly when she sat down to do her make-up. She became nervous and uneasy and could not concentrate, yet the tension was not connected with going to the studio. Several times she found herself staring into the eyes of her reflection and had to force herself to carry on. Once she had finished, however, her enthusiasm returned and she left for the studio in high spirits.

Christine found the studio quite easily, and introduced herself to the young man clad in jeans and jumper who was working behind the counter.

"Ah, yes. Miss James. Glad you could come," he smiled, coming round to Christine's side of the counter to look her up and down. He flipped the 'OPEN' sign in the door to 'CLOSED'. "If you'd like to come round the back, Miss James ..."

He took her through to the studio proper, a large room kitted out with cameras, tripods, lights, diffuser boards and umbrellas and all sorts of photographic paraphernalia. In one corner there was a sofa and an ornate double bed, but the photographer steered her to the portraiture area opposite, where flattering lighting illuminated an otherwise plain section of the room.

Here he had her pose for some photos, and Christine needed all her concentration to follow his orders concerning posture and stance. Several times when he was taking close-up shots, however, Christine caught sight of her reflection in the camera lens, only to be roused again by the photographer's impatient bark as he repeated his directions.

"Okay, over to the bed and take off your dress," he ordered. "I hope you're not wearing tights ..."

"S-sorry?" stammered Christine, caught off guard.

The photographer was already standing by the bed, camera ready. "Come on sunshine, I haven't got all day! Hurry up and get that dress off!"

Christine did as she was told, and gradually the photographer verbally undressed her, so that half an hour later she was posing naked on the bed. She had to wrench her memory back fifteen years to when she last had a body to flaunt, but the photographer was evidently pleased with the results. By the end of the session his affability had returned, and when Christine counted out the money he gave her she found that the was more than enough for her immediate needs.

Yet the experience left a bitter taste in her mouth that was hard to reconcile, and the delayed shock of having had to expose herself to the photographer and his voyeur public began to take effect, causing her to tremble and feel slightly faint as she left the studio.

Outside the noise of the vehicles in the street echoed around inside Christine's brain, making her head reel. The jostling people on the pavement were menacing, crowding in on the pretty young woman who was trying to find a way through. Their leering faces peered down at her, and then, as some dark corner of her mind compared the warped images to the mirror at PTI, she was seized by a sudden panic that fed and amplified her claustrophobia.

Out of the corner of her eye, over the wall of heads that hemmed her in, Christine caught sight of the recessed doorway of a shop, where there seemed to be less people. She pushed desperately towards the sacred alcove, but the other shoppers were trying to prevent her passing. She tried again, more frantically, and at last burst out of the crowd, into the haven of tranquility. She stopped to catch her breath, to let the pounding in her ears die down and allow her body to stop trembling like a frightened nestling.

Looking away from the great flow of people rushing past on the pavement, Christine's eyes were drawn without hesitation to those of her reflection in one of the plate glass windows that flanked the doorway. She stood mesmerised, her body motionless, her trembling forgotten, her gaze locked on the eyes of the ghostly apparition in front of her. Again her mind drew comparison with the time at PTI and she was back in the

laboratory, helpless and unable to move as she underwent the transformation process. This time, however, as the eyes of her reflection bored deep into her head, Christine struggled to escape from the trance, certain that she would again feel the intolerable agony and sickening sensation of her flesh running like liquid along her bones ...

Suddenly her body shuddered, breaking the spell, and Christine was at last able to turn uneasily away from the window and the reflection and continue on her way home.

She returned to the photographer, and then again on what became a regular basis. At first he had her pose nude again, but on subsequent visits she had to dress up for him in clothes he kept at the studio. These sessions were the complete antithesis of Christine's original modelling dreams and she was several times on the point of refusing to return to the studio, but with the money he paid her she managed to set herself up in a small flat and enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle. It was inevitable that the photographer would force his attentions on her, and when he eventually did so Christine was astonished to find that her initial disgust was short-lived and soon replaced by a feeling that the liaison offered her added security of income.

It started as the natural conclusion to the photo sessions, as they acted out the scenes portrayed by Christine as schoolgirl, chambermaid or lady of the house, but the characters quickly became more and more extreme. Often the role playing took over completely and the camera sat forgotten to one side, as the photographer forced her into violent acts of submission, where bondage and flagellation became increasingly important. He took great delight in experimenting with the sickest and most debased perversions, astounding Christine with the constant fertility of his imagination and invariably pushing her to the limits of her endurance. If she ever ventured to complain, his response was the same: beautiful women were so common now they were boring, so other sources of pleasure had to be found to sate him and his unseen public ...

One day she arrived at the studio to find no clothes laid out for her to put on. Relieved at the prospect of an orthodox session for once, she undressed automatically and lay back on the bed to receive him ...

... and looked straight up at her reflection in the mirror over the bed.

The photographer interpreted her sharp gasp as part of the act and ignored it, oblivious of her petrified eyes. Christine's breath caught in her throat so that she could only stutter: "I ... I ..."

She lay motionless beneath him as he made love to her, her whimpers sounding to him like moans of pleasure.His movements became more frantic, but Christine only saw their image repeated in countless reflections around her. A thousand white buttocks heaved between a thousand slender young legs wherever she looked, surrounding her in a cage of copulation. Even when they at last reached orgasm, their sex-cries echoed in her ears as though the many mirrors reflected sound as well as light.

When Christine finally returned home to her flat, she scurried around like a frightened mouse, trembling and wide-eyed. Averting her face she draped a large towel over the bathroom mirror, only daring to look to check that it was secure, to make sure that her reflection was concealed.

But windows with the darkness of night behind would serve just as well as silvered glass, and so she closed her eyes and drew the curtains across, stamping out the ghost that had been unwittingly sent to haunt her; in the main room a glass-fronted cabinet was covered over ...

At last, when she was satisfied that all was adequately covered, the flat looked like it was about to be decorated. She retreated to the bedroom and collapsed on the bed, and gradually her short, shallow breaths lengthened into sleep.

When she awoke the drawn curtains prevented her knowing if it was night or day, but she did not care. Even if she had she would not have dared lift the curtain for fear of seeing once more the image of those all-too-familiar features ...

Time passed unnoticed and Christine spent most of it in a near catatonic state, remaining in the bedroom except for the infrequent call of bodily functions: such inactivity required little sustenance.

Eventually her energy began to return, and with it an increasing need to go outside.

She changed her clothes and pulled a careless comb through her hair, and unthinking let her dragging feet take her to the photographer's studio.

The sign said 'CLOSED' when she got there, but she rattled the locked door until the scowling photographer emerged, buckling up his jeans.

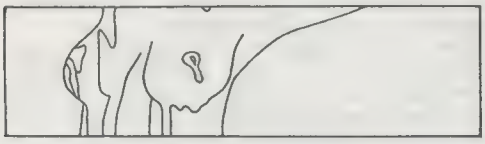
"What the hell do you want?" he demanded, unlocking the door to let her in.

"I thought you wanted ..."

"I finished with you the last time you walked out of that door, didn't you realise that? No, you come shambling in looking like a six-year-old who's been playing with her mother's make-up - though anyone would think you'd never been near a mirror in your life - expecting me to fall down at your feet and worship you. That's the trouble with you bloody Changelings, you reckon you're so damn beautiful that your whole world automatically becomes a bed of roses just like that. You don't realise how much you screwed things up with your silly little ideas, how many dreams you've shattered for men who thought that beautiful women lay just out of their reach. You've brought in a whole new set of standards, with yourselves right back down at the bottom. It's rarity value not quality that counts in the end, so you've cut your own throats. You're so common you're boring, and men are looking elsewhere for their pleasure."

As the photographer was talking an enormous naked Negress appeared in the doorway to the back room, quiet ironic laughter rippling the thick folds of her glistening black flesh as she rolled her eyes melodramatically at Christine.

The photographer concluded his tirade but Christine was already closing the door behind her, heedless of the torrent of abuse which followed her out into the street. Some of his words remained with her, though. He had called her a 'Changeling', the first time Christine had heard the word used in this sense, but somehow it struck her as being sickeningly apt. A child of society replaced by one of a form of much more unnatural beauty.



Her route took her through the town centre, with its intense bustle and activity. The occasional unappraising gaze followed her as she hurried by, heads turned, a few at first and then more, to see her pass. A young boy tugged at his mother's sleeve and pointed. "Look mummy, there goes a Changeling."

The word was like a lighted fuse.

Everyone looked at her. Not one face was turned away. Christine watched the ground in front of her feet and walked quickly on, not daring to meet anyone's stare. Glancing up to check her direction, Christine saw a wall of people barring her way, only a dozen paces ahead. She carried on forward: they would let her through.

Slowly a faint rustling noise impressed itself on Christine's awareness, slowly increasing in volume. Very soon the sound was loud enough for her recognise it as human voices, whispering and muttering, but she could not distinguish what they were saying.

In front of her the people were still blocking her way.

"Please, let me through," she pleaded in a small voice.

Suddenly the noise around her became deafening, and she clapped her hands over her ears. As if on cue the incoherent whisperings had become a clear and well-defined chant.

"Changeling! Changeling! Changeling! Changeling!"

Christine spun round to seek escape back the way she had come, but the people surrounded her in a decreasing circle, crowding closer and closer. Standing there in bewildered fright, she dimly saw the mass of people, men, women, and even small children all raising their voices as if to some unseen deity.

"Changeling! Changeling! Changeling! Changeling!"

Curiously the chant kept time with her heartbeat, speeding up as her pulse raced, resonating in her body.

"CHANGELING! CHANGELING! CHANGELING!"

The people closed around her, pushing and jostling. She felt something wet land on her cheek, and then others started spitting too, aiming for her eyes, making them sting and smart.

"CHANGELING!"

She felt someone kicking her shins,

"CHANGELING!"

a child's fist pummelling the soft flesh of her stomach.

"CHANGELING!"

A hysterical woman somehow found room in the restricted space to swing her handbag at her,

# DON'T GET LEFT BEHIND

## BACK BRAIN RECLUSE

## SELLS FAST

Make sure of your copy by subscribing direct for only £2:50 for 4 issues. Just fill in the form below. What could be simpler?

See page 6 for Overseas Prices.

To: **BACK BRAIN RECLUSE.** CHRIS REED. Oakleigh, 16 Somersall Lane, Somersall, Chesterfield, Derbyshire.

Here is my CHEQUE/POSTAL ORDER for £2:50 for four issue subscription.

NAME: (BLOCK CAPITALS)_____

ADDRESS: _____

_____

_____ POSTCODE: _____

"CHANGELING!"
someone else bloodied Christine's nose.
"CHANGELING! CHANGELING!"
Suddenly all the people, all the noise, were gone. The shopping precinct was empty, leaving Christine, limping on both legs, to stagger homeward unhindered.
She would have known that she had never even been touched, that there was not one mark on her body -
If only she dared look in a mirror.

Christine picked up a paper that was lying discarded on the floor, and flipped through it automatically for want of anything better to do. She paused to glance at an item about PTI on one of the minor pages, reporting the closing down of their new beauty treatment. It went on to state that the process had placed too much of a psychological burden on the patients, but Christine had already moved on: it was enough to know that another escape route had been walled up.
She had considered going back to PTI for a rechange, so that with her original appearance she would be able to find Carl and persuade him to let her come back ... Yet she remembered the trauma of the process, the petrifying feeling of liquefied flesh flowing along bones, the overwhelming agony generated by the sensors on her temples, and doubted that she would ever have been able to endure that again.
The photographer's attitude reminded her of Carl and his reactions to her new body. Perhaps all men held Changelings in contempt? Apart from her husband's scorn, Christine had encountered nothing but indifference. The photographer had never even noticed how the mirror - she shuddered at the thought - had scared her half to death. Yes, no man gave a toss about her now, she was just another Changeling. As the photographer had put it, they looked elsewhere for their pleasure now. She realised that she did indeed need the luck wished her by the technician back at PTI, although she had scorned it at the time. Maybe he really had known something she hadn't. Or maybe it had taken the transformation to simply awaken her to Man's attitude to Woman, that it had been the same all the time, a universal constant that she had merely been made aware of. God damn all men!
But she still needed them, even if they no longer needed her. They were her bread and butter, her sole means of survival. And now she had to look for the stale crusts.

"Hey woman! D'ya wanna earn some money?"
Christine looked up at the caller, a stocky thickset man standing by a rusty Transit van.
"Yeah, alright," she called back. She was beyond the embarrassment that she would have felt only a short while ago at being confronted in the street like this. Heads may have turned at the raised voices, but she was past caring. All that mattered was that mention of money ...
She walked over, and the man indicated for her to get into the van. He was about forty, and Christine could smell the whiskey on his breath. He started the engine and pulled away, and soon they were heading out of the town and into the countryside, following roads that were unfamiliar to Christine. She assumed that the man lived in the country, and that he was taking her to the privacy of his home, but he pulled up in a small layby in a quiet lane.
"Right, in the back," he rasped.
Christine did as she was bid, and found a dirty old mattress awaiting her. She was joined by the man and undressed quickly, and soon found that his libido, like his driving remained unaffected by the alcohol.

Dusk was falling by the time he eventually tired of her, and the van became chilly as the afternoon sun disappeared behind the trees. Christine ached from being pulled into an endless variety of positions; she was swollen and bruised and her back raked by fingernails.
Suddenly the man's voice cut into her semi-awareness of her surroundings. "Okay, out you get. You know the way home from here."
Christine's head cleared immediately. "What do you mean, out?" she shrieked. "What about my money?"
"There never was any money, except in your head."
"But you said -"

"Never mind what I said," snapped the man in reply. "You've screwed your last darling."

"You lousy bastard!" screamed Christine, struggling now against the strong grip of his hands. "I shouldn't have expected any better from a drunken old sod like you!"

She saw his hand flashing towards her face, but instead of the slap she was expecting his fist connected squarely with her jaw and she slumped unconscious.

When Christine came to again she found it was already nighttime. Hew jaw was throbbing angrily but she could not rub it as her hands were tied behind her back. She tried to move but her muscles were cramped and would not respond - already her body was chilled by the cool of the night. Her mouth was dry and her tongue felt swollen. She licked her lips, trying to produce some saliva, but little came. She cried out but her feeble voice was instantly lost in the darkness. She called again, but her throat seemed clogged. She coughed and fresh pain licked up her jaw.

Slowly she began to lose the feeling in first one foot and then the other. It was a little while before her fingers, tight in the small of her back, also became numb. The trees overhead started to rustle as a night breeze picked up, but Christine's body was sheltered by the sides of the ditch. Memories flitted through her mind, random events from her life. The wind got stronger and autumn leaves fluttered down every now and again, momentarily eclipsing the stars. Some of the leaves fell on her body, but she could not feel them. She was only aware that she was tired, oh so tired, and that she must sleep. It was night, she was tired, therefore she must sleep. She let her eyes close and gratefully abandoned herself to unconsciousness for the second time in as many hours.

"You've screwed your last, darling."

The gusting wind knocked a steady rain of leaves from the branches, and by distant dawn their copper-bronze embrace had silently embalmed that which was once living.

THE END

---

# SWINGING THE LEAD

The job experience was 'pitiful'
Dogsbody, fetch this, fetch that -
but the perks looked good

The Church roof was a Goldmine
Everyone on the job got more
than a weeks wages worth of Bluey

It didn't last long though -
over-reaching a greedy slab
of lead the Yoppy slipped,

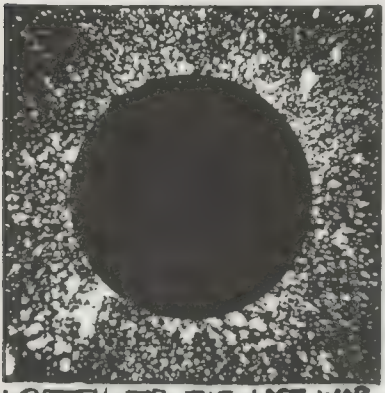
Forty feet below his broken body
Served as a cruel witness
to "Job experience".

* Bluey ... Lead

**Tom Bingham**

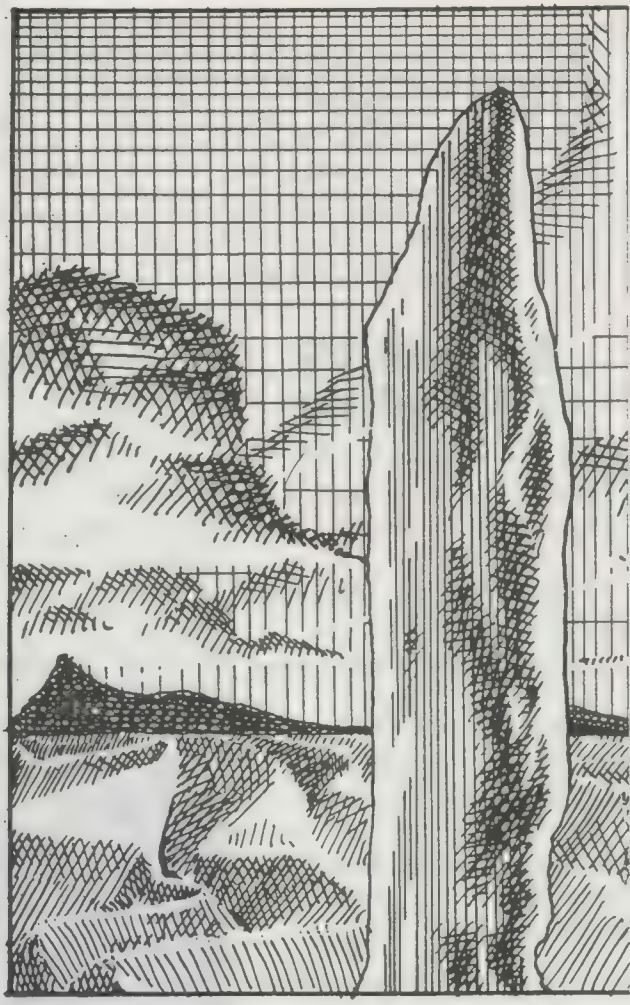
# SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO

OF THE MANY LAMENTS, MORE PROBABLY THAN SURVIVORS,

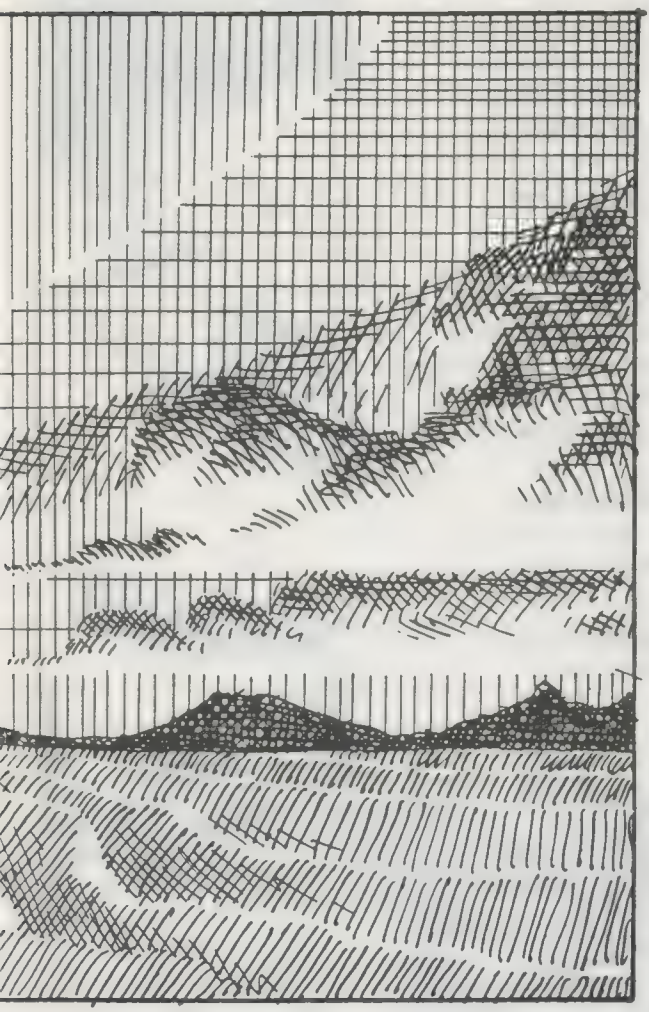


WRITTEN FOR THE LAST WAR THAT COVERED SOL III IN IT'S MOURNING CLOAK OF ASH,

MY FAVOURITE IS, AND ALWAYS WILL BE:



STORY : STEVE SNEYD
ART : D'ISRAELI



"WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS, THE CRADLE WILL FALL."

HAVING BOUGHT THE WORLD-HULK CHEAP,

THAT SONG WILL BE MY THEME-PARK'S THEME-TUNE.

THE END.

# The Curse Of Man

## by Michael Moorcock

WE HAVE DESPOILED THE EARTH AND OUR WOMEN ARE DISHONOURED
WITH OUR WEAPONS WE HAVE MELTED EVERY GATEWAY TO SALVATION
WE THOUGHT OURSELVES SAFE IN OUR ARMOUR AND OUR MASKS
AND SO WE SAVED OURSELVES, IT'S TRUE, FOR OUR DAMNATION
WE HAVE BEEN DAMNED BY THE CURSE OF MAN
WE HAVE BEEN DAMNED BY THE CURSE OF MAN

WE REFUSED TO HEAR THE OUTRAGE OF REASON'S DAUGHTERS
THE ANGER OF UNWARLIKE SONS WHICH CROSSED ALL WATERS
THE PLEADINGS OF THE INNOCENTS, THE MORAL ARGUMENTS
TO MODERATION, GENEROSITY, KINDNESS AND CONSENT
SO WE WERE DAMNED BY THE CURSE OF MAN
WE WERE ALL DAMNED BY THE CURSE OF MAN

WE RAISED A GENOCIDAL FLAG, IMPERIAL AND BOASTFUL FLAG,
RAISED A STANDARD OF CONTEMPT, AND MOUNTED ON A BONEY NAG
BECAME THE HERALD OF APOCALYPSE; THE ENEMIES OF WOMEN;
THE VICIOUS HARVESTERS OF SOULS; DEATH'S CHUCKLING CHILDREN.
DAMNED BY VIOLENCE, THE CURSE OF MAN
WE'RE DAMNED BY VIOLENCE, THE CURSE OF MAN

IN OUR WARLIKE SWAGGERING AND OUR CHILDISH RAGE
WE ROBBED OURSELVES OF LIBERTY, AND BUILT THE CAGE
IN WHICH WE'RE HEMMED, CONDEMNED, FOREVER DAMNED
FOR VIOLENCE IS THE CURSE OF MAN
AND NOW WE'RE DAMNED BY THE CURSE OF MAN
FOREVER DAMNED BY THE CURSE OF MAN
THE CURSE OF MAN...

# circular error

## andrew darlington

Ascraeus Mons could not, with the best will in any world, be described as attractive. Sheckley might grudgingly concede a certain monolithic grandeur to its endless igneous stone formations frozen into tides of lava beneath the clear, perpetually star-shocked sky. Millions of years ago the molten tide must have flowed in incandescent waves from the now-stagnant volcanic peak of the Martian mountain, but now nothing moved other than the pressurised Cat-track carrying Sheckley and his sullen escort. He flecked his attention back into the confines of the Car. There were two men with him, 'Special' Officers. Their armour, bubble pants and perspex visors gave them a ludicrously threatening, but nevertheless real, air of menace. A deliberate psychological strategy. They could no longer be regarded as individuals with the emotional vulnerabilities of individuals; they were anonymous units for Law enforcement shifted beyond an impenetrable interface of garb. Inevitably, he concluded, the process of such alienation, of social polarisation, works as effectively on both sides of the mask.

The Officers were largely superfluous to the disciplined, hermetically tight research colonies of Mars, present nonetheless as political cyphers representing the nascent image of authority, provoking ideological constancy, and providing a physical reminder of the source of all funds. Exactly the humourlessly inflexible pressures Sheckley had hoped to escape on Mars. He always experienced an uncomfortable wash of guilt in the presence of the Specials, illogical in this case as they were his escort, not his captors, but the reaction was deeply ingrained. He smiled meaninglessly at the blankly reflecting perspex, and replayed the incidents of his summons to Ascraeus Mons.

"You work with Data Retrieval Systems?" A voice from the video-com. "Strip them down, repair them? Understand their internal machinations?"

The face memory-congealed into the image of Director Drinning even as he formulated his response. "To an extent, yes. But it's largely a matter of component substitution rather than repair. I throw out the faulty part and replace it with a new part. There is no actual repair. It is necessary for me to be familiar enough with the process to locate the point of malfunction, but little beyond." NO point in explaining self-repair facilities, or automatic defect detection tracers.

The face in the screen paused, caught between anger and indecision.

"Perhaps if I knew the nature of your problem I'd be in a better position to evaluate," he probed.

"This is high security. The highest. We've wired to Earth for expert assistance but that will take six months to arrive. In the meantime we have you, and Professor Rischoff, the greatest authorities on Mars."

"By default," Sheckley added under his

breath.

Ascraeus Mons was a small station some fifty inhospitable miles from any sizeable conurbation. He could see it now through the windshield of the Car, its glassine dome-cluster separating out before the Cat-track. It was largely - if memory served correctly - an archaeological establishment with a minimum of basic electronics hardware. Nothing indigenous that could conceivably warrant such furtive urgency. The Car piloted violently down a long slow gradient of shifting shingle to draw up before the largest of the domes; a tunneltube married, and the door-sphincter irised open.

Sheckley stood aside impatiently as his escort went through their surreal military rituals of disembarkation. He followed them through the umbilical and into the dome, down a length of starkly functional metal corridor and into a small Reception Lounge beyond. Here some attempt had been made to provide a modicum of luxury. A curve of plushly upholstered divans and some lush, but flowerless, potted plants of the aspidistra family.

From behind a small, unimpressively stocked bar, the portly, untidily dressed figure of Doctor Drinning approached him. "Welcome to Ascraeus Mons, Mr. Sheckley," he said without warmth.

"Beautiful home you have here," smiled Sheckley.

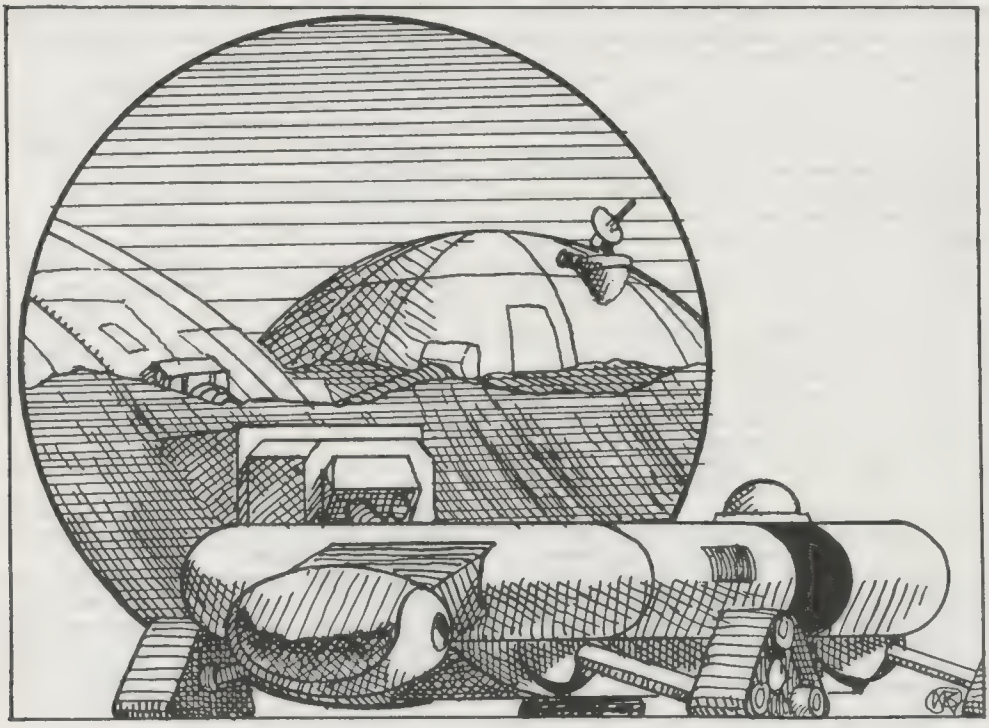
The archaeologist scowled. "You must understand the level of importance implicit in this meeting. You will forfeit all external rights until the problem has been overcome. We can allow no leak."

There are, thought Sheckley, two kinds of human being. Those with humour and those without. Those who recognise the basic comic absurdity of all endeavour, and those to whom endeavour is all. Sheckley in the first, Drinning and the Specials in the second category.

Drinning relented slightly, indicated that they should be seated, and offered a drink, although the hospitality remained formal, superficial.

Sheckley accepted the proffered glass and sipped it apprehensively. "Perhaps if you were to brief me on the problem now it would save time."

Drinning flopped heavily on to the tesselated divan opposite Sheckley, avoiding his eyes. "A week ago our excavations uncovered an artefact completely immersed in volcanic strata. It was brought into the domes. Upon further investigation its basic nature was identified." He glanced



furtively, sidelong at the impassive escort, and his voice dropped a guilty octave. "Its purpose as an electronic data storage system becoming obvious. It is vacuum sealed and bears no trace of deterioration or corrosion."

Sheckley regarded the archaeologist critically over the rim of the glass, beads of moisture condensation pearling his lip. He was beginning to doubt his original estimate of Drinning's sense of humour, and his sanity. "That seems a wild conjecture."

His skepticism was ignored. "We believe this equipment has survived intact for millions of years," continued the portly figure. "That it was left here by some, probably extinct, alien species to pass on to us their most profound secrets of technology, philosophy, and mathematics. With only slight modification it was possible to connect it up to a compatible power source at one end, plus a keyboard input and a print-out screen at the other."

"With what results?"

"Frankly, that's where we hoped you could help us. The read-outs so far have been confusing."

Sheckley drained his glass in a sudden jerky movement, as if the termination of the drinking process would help resolve the outlandish conversation with an equally satisfying finality. The raw liquid burned into the roof of his mouth. "Presumably it's the language," he ventured. "Ancient Martian?"

"Don't be facetious. There were no Martians. This is a single artefact, as such it's of inestimable importance. Just that we can't understand what it says. We need to bypass the language barrier in some way to get at the information locked behind it."

"If the machine was programmed in Martian then the read-out will be in Martian. Just as if it were Russian. We could translate it if we knew the language involved. It's a semantics expert you need, not an electronics man."

"But we don't know the language, and so far as we know there's no possibility of discovering a Rosetta Stone." Drinning stood up abruptly, as though by the offering and consuming of a drink the irritating conventions of courtesy were satisfied, and could be discarded.

Sheckley carefully placed the glass on the mirrored bar surface, his attention straying through the glassine inserts in the Reception Lounge wall to the unchanging undulations of scoria beyond. He was already resigning himself to a long stay, a prospect that filled him with unrelieved dread. Because Drinning obviously expected him to rise he remained seated for as long as discretion would allow, then meekly followed the Director into the warren of steel of which the base consisted.

"The Special Officers will convey your luggage to your allocated quarters," commented Drinning.

"They are staying here also?"

"This is now a high security installation, a contingency of Officers to maintain that security is only to be expected."

"Of course," muttered Sheckley dismally.

The adits were a featureless metallic digestive tract, red monochrome glowstrips providing stark shadowless light, illuminating the occasional accessway, corridor intersection, or sliding doors presumably leading off to equally impersonal living accommodation. The portly Director moved with an unwavering sense of purpose through the dome and into a second tunneltube towards a satellite blister. The smaller dome was shuttered off by thick dural air-locks secured by a set of coded electronic acceptance filters, admittance granted only after the correct digital combination had been fed in.

Once shunted into the blister beyond, Sheckley stood at the perimeter and gaped. Apart from a few stacks of equipment in haphazard pyramid formations the dome was crudely furnished and austere, all attention automatically drawn to the plinth at its epicentre. A focal point concentrating on what at first appeared to be a milky white egg six metres high by eight long atop the low platform. The egg was veined with a deeper white neural structure but was otherwise featureless. Incongruously thick coiled power lines were affixed to the far end of the egg, and as Drinning had intimated, and orthodox keyboard terminal and print-out screen at the nearside.

Poring over the screen was a lank uncoordinated figure that Sheckley recognised as Professor Rischoff, a pompous and self-opinionated programmer from New Montmartre. Rischoff turned and nodded in their direction as the newcomers paced towards him.

"Mr. Rischoff, this is Sheckley," blustered Drinning. "Do you have any updates for us?"

Rischoff was tall, squinting down at Sheckley through retinal correction lenses that gave him a dreaming, glaucomous appearance. But the appraisal was clinical, and the rapid shift of attention back to

Drinning came as criticism in itself. "I have keyed in numerous questions," he began in a voice absurdly pitched an octave too high, "and have analysed the answers. But making cross-references and correlations could take years, it could take forever. We are dealing with a totally alien language with no semantic ties to any Terran tongue."

"Can you be sure it is a language," interjected Sheckley, determined to establish conversational territory, "and not just random configurations? What happens if you feed the same question twice?"

"We tried that," admitted Rischoff. "The answers consist of sets of symbols that are consistent up to a point, but with a differential margin of ten per cent."

"Could that ten per cent be reduced down by subsequent repetitions?"

"Unfortunately no. Answer 'C' is ten per cent different from answer 'B', and is also different from answer 'A'. The ten per cent differential is a constant, no pattern can be built up."

Sheckley laughed incongruously. "So there are sufficient singularities to indicate the existence of a pattern, but not sufficient to provide a basis for deciphering it." The blasphemous irreverence was ignored.

"So we must bypass the language and get direct to the concepts," insisted Drinning.

Sheckley walked carefully around the object: having made his contribution to the dialogue he was now content to let it proceed without him.

"You don't understand," Rischoff was emphasising. "The method of storing information is irrelevant. In this case it is electronic, but it could just as easily be a book, it's only a method of recording. There is no way of 'bypassing' language, because all there is in there is coded language. You can't reach into it and pick out squirming abstract concepts, it just doesn't work that way."

Sheckley stared at the egg for long moments, from different angles.

"Don't take me for a fool," scolded Drinning. "This machine was left deliberately for us to find. It must be programmed in such a way that there is a logical procedure for extracting answers from it. I realise that language is unique, that it is not a code but the product of idiosyncratic social usage, an evolution unique to each culture. But there are concepts, abstractions, that go beyond all colloquial limitations and can be understood without linguistics."

"You mean mathematics? Geometry? Nuclear constants?"

Eventually disparate factors began to fall into place. Sheckley traced the neural infrastructure, mentally reinterpreting it as a circuit diagram. Then other 'components' gelled until he was building up a composite picture of the egg's function. Making the switch from alien to human technology with remarkable ease. The fact seemed tantalisingly significant.

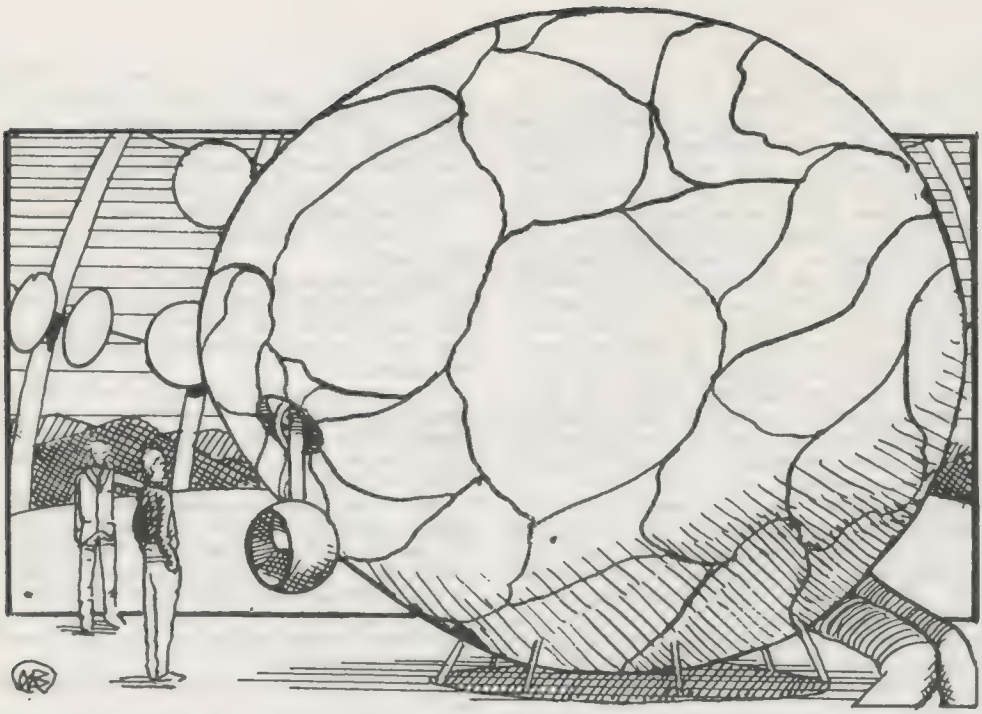
Drinning was nodding emphatically. "I believe there is some form of base along such lines, yes. Even if it limits the nature of the information in the machine to that which could be expressed in numerical terms. Equations and the like."

Rischoff shrugged and began stalking up and down as Sheckley, having completed his circumnavigation of the plinth, rejoined them. "Perhaps the big questions of existence can be reduced down to such terms. Perhaps the most profound conundrums of human existence and metaphysics can be so expressed. Perhaps they are encoded in such a fashion in that machine. But in either case, semantic or numerical, we have to know the terminology that was used to programme the equipment. The cyphers. By stripping it down you could perhaps deduce the method of information storage, but by such a method the information itself would be lost - unless the method was, in itself, the information ..." Rischoff's voice trailed away unhappily.

"When do we eat?" demanded Sheckley.

The meandering circuitous disquisition continued as they left the satellite blister. Drinning killed the auxiliary lights, leaving only three spotlamps jury-rigged on the curving walls to flood the egg, investing it with the almost primeval mystique of a pagan altar. Sheckley watched the security procedure as they cycled through the airlock. Then they moved back up the tube into the main dome where he was directed to his own quarters.

The room allocated to him for the duration of his stay was spartanly furnished, his travelling grip neatly dividing the bunk with euclidian precision. There were books, all of a technical nature, no novels or light reading. No frivolity of any description. Once alone the implications of this new exile began to bear down on him claustrophobically. A full pervasive weight of humourless diligence. He'd left Earth to escape the drab totalitarianism of the xenophobic European states, but its attitudes, its negations had followed him.



Preceded him. He paced the room, carefully measuring each tread, his concentration drifting back to the Martian egg. It was mocking him with some indefinable quality he couldn't identify. At length he concluded that the characteristic he found most appealing was its basic absurdity. It resembled human technology closely enough for it to be immediately comprehensible, yet it was just strange enough to be believably alien. A premise so ridiculous that he approved of it. A caricature. The idea was intriguingly vague, but seemed to carry the germ of substance.

He lay back on the unyielding bed, surrendered to his fatigue, and slept a confused dream-haunted sleep.

He awoke to the clear sensation of loss, a conviction that the answer was ebbing from his consciousness as sleep receded. Consulting the wall insert he discovered he'd slept for less than two hours, and, goaded by hunger, he washed hurriedly with a moisture-impregnated sponge and headed for the Reception Lounge. Drinning and Rischoff were already seated, deep in conversation, and ignored Sheckley as the newcomer pored over the Autoserve selector. The menu was wholesome rather than inventive, but at last he punched out a meal, retrieved an appetisingly steaming tray from the hopper and flopped down on to the curved divan opposite them. The conversation came at him peripherally as he crammed toasted rye bread coated with a vitamin-rich layer of cheese and diced vegetables into his mouth, washed down with liberal amounts of scalding black coffee.

His attention homed in selectively, picking up fragmented sentences.

Drinning was saying, "... concepts are unfettered by language. You can express 'the sky is blue' in any language, the words change but the concept is the same. The image can be abstracted and expressed in different forms."

Rischoff was countering, "... yes, but there is no ultimate quality of 'blueness', it is an abstraction formed by words. The language forms the question. Without the language there is no question. Or there is a multitude of answers each relevant to each culture, and ultimately to each individual."

It occurred to Sheckley that they were enjoying the exchange, that the Martian egg was merely an excuse for the dialogue, a justification for an exhibition of erudition that they were both wallowing in. If initially the discovery of the artefact had

proved an irritant to their neatly encapsulated world-views, it was now proving to be a useful catalyst in breaking down their carefully structured walls of reserve.

Rischoff was on the edge of his seat impatiently awaiting a conversational opening. When it occurred he pounced. "The answer is determined by the terminology. You pose the question 'what colour is the sky'. In other words you form a sentence made up of verbal units, implying that an answer can be compounded in the same way. The answer does not exist of itself. It only exists in relation to the question. It is not a constant incontrovertible truth. It is a variable shaped by imprecise tools. Hunting 'the truth' is like questing for the grail. It does not exist except as an abstraction, and is chimerical with or without its expression. There is no universal concept."

Sheckley laughed abruptly, the scientists turning on him sharply as if only now becoming aware of his presence. He allowed their attention to focus on him as he swallowed coffee. Their chain of logic was broken by his intrusion. He held an advantage, and decided to exploit it. "So without the language you have - nothing?" he summed up.

"Not exactly," said Rischoff chagrinously. "We know something of the nature of what is stored in the machine. The information must be of the kind that can be stored in the form of language."

"And that just brings you back to the original impasse."

There was a brief disturbing silence. Outside the dome, twilight was falling thickly over the volcanic peaks of Ascraeus Mons, shadows trapped in the clinically lifeless canyons, spilling out on to the shingle plain beyond. It was a neutral landscape, devoid of life and hence of character. Yet the egg had been extracted from those mountains, and as an artefact it was open to human interpretation. It could assume character. The idea played around Sheckley's head.

'You, presumably, have a way of extricating us from that impasse?"

Drinning was offering a challenge. An invitation to join the game. The enigma of the egg was already incidental, the rules of the dialogue now established. Carefully Sheckley fielded his gambit. "A Data Retrieval System stores information. It stores concise, finite information. In order to gain access to that data you have to know the potential range of questions it is capable of answering." He had their attention. "You have to know the precise nature of the potential range of answers, in order to form the correct question."

Rischoff stared at him in open hostility. "In other words you have to know the answer before you can key the question?"

Sheckley nodded. "More or less."

"So you're saying the whole thing is pointless?"

"all I'm saying is that you are investing this thing with a type of mystique that it does not possess. If we accept that it is a machine, then we must accept its limitations as a machine."

The words seemed cold, he was already regretting their use. Rischoff and Drinning resented him now for breaking the rules of their game, for pointing out its basic irrationality.

"But there must be a way," said Rischoff, almost pleading. "Thins thing was left here for us to find. It was left deliberately. There must have been a rational thought behind such an act. There must be a logical way of tackling the problem, a systematic procedure through which we can gain access to its information."

Drinning nodded animatedly. "There must be."

Sheckley paused. An answer was forming itself in his head but he didn't use it. To assert that perhaps the Martian egg was not rational would be regarded as further heresy. Instead he just shrugged. A gesture intended to imply conciliation.

Immediately Drinning smirked, accepting the abdication as vindication of their procedural method. He stood up rather too quickly. "It's getting late. Time we turned in."

Rischoff followed, glancing questioningly at the electronics man.

Sheckley indicated the half-consumed polystyrene container of cooling coffee, its surface-skin rippling leprously. "I'll follow you shortly." He watched the ill-matched couple leave the Lounge, and sank back into the upholstery, luxuriating in its plushness. He raised the beaker, held it in front of the light, examined its reticulations carefully, his mind working on automatic. There is a basic conflict dividing the human race, he mused, those with humour and those without. The delineation is presumably extendable to non-human species. At Ascraeus Mons I'm the interloper. My attitudes don't fit. But does that necessarily disqualify those attitudes? There is an element of illogic that has escaped Drinning and Rischoff. An alien

civilisation a million years dead leaves a device so similar to Terran technology that it can practically be plugged into the mains! Is that likely? That two cultures can have evolved separately, but be so similar? Doesn't that strain credulity a little? But what other possibility remains? That it is not alien, but Russian? That it is not a machine, but alive?

He sipped at the coffee. It was cold. He set it down accurately on the floor, aware of the chill of encroaching Martian night. It was an illusory chill, he was insulated from any direct tactile contact with Mars. Temperature was thermostatically regulated to the requirement of Earth. The chill was fraudulent, but nevertheless real.

He stood up, intent on returning to his room, and ambled off down the corridor. The Special Officers and the Cat-track that had brought him to the dome would be safely returned to the hermetically sealed bubble city from which they had come. He was aware of his solitude, his isolation. His need of a like mind. He reached an intersection and recognised the tunnel shifting off to the right as the one leading to the satellite blister housing the egg, and he found himself moving along it without a clear idea of his motive. As an intellectual exercise the Rischoff/Drinning game was fascinating, he conceded, but its precepts were too ludicrous to take seriously.

He operated the security grid he'd memorised from earlier passage, and stepped through the dural airlock into the presence of the Martian egg. It was bathed in arc-light, comically grandiose. Sheckley found himself smiling at its absurdity. A sympathetic, warmly human absurdity. Someone or something had set him a problem. So far the problem had been approached from a semantic, a technological, and a metaphysical angle. The challenge had been accepted at its face value. So far they'd got nowhere.

Sheckley slouched to the input and rested his hands on the keys, feeling an almost sensual intimacy with the object. He savoured the moment, then stabbed out a rapid sequence of letters. Words spelled out in green luminous symbols on the display:

'O.K THE GAME IS UP.'

The screen blanked. Paused. Then replied:

'YOUR TURN NOW.'

As the egg began to lose shape amoebically, Sheckley began to laugh. A rich deep laugh of kinship.

THE END

---

# KING OF A NUTSHELL

Up the tunnel a Snowbow lured.

"No real harm in them, son,"
said Uncle Gart, "just lonely.
Never touch one, though, poisonous
as hell."

Like you, the boy thought,
imagining the planetoid his alone,
no more silly rules.

Swiftly he tripped the oldster
into Snowbow arms.

Needed, they avoid him.

**Steve Sneyd**

AZIMUTH: A MATTER OF ASCENDANCY..
BY ISRAELI D'EMON DRAUGHTSMAN...
A LONELY HIKER, AND A BORING LANDSCAPE. A PLEASANT DAY...
EASE...
EASE-A-COMIN'!!
HE HE HE HE HA HA HA HO HO HO NYUK NYUK NYAK
CRACK!!
A MOMENT OF HIGH HALLUCINATORY STRANGENESS...
GREETINGS, EVOLUTIONARY INFERIOR, I AM THAT WHICH MAKES YOU REDUNDANT...
YES! I AM MORE ADVANCED THAN YOU..
THAT BASTARD DARWIN!!
I AM BIGGER
I AM STRONGER
I AM FASTER
I AM SMARTER
AND MY TUMMY DOES'NT RUMBLE!
I ONLY EVOLVED THIS MORNING AND ALREADY I'VE DEVELOPED PRETENTIOUSNESS...
MY RACE HAS NO WAR, NO FAMINE AND NO BELLY-BUTTON FLUFF!
BREATH-TAKING, INNIT..?
WEEP YOUR LAST, REDUNDANT CHOPS!!!
oh-oh..
SPLITTY SPRAY
SPLATTY SPRAY
BLAM!
SPRAY
PISS.
OF COURSE THAT'S THE TROUBLE WITH YER RADICAL YOUTH...
ALL MOUTH AND NO TROUSERS...
D'END

# DEATH TRAP

## CHRIS REED

"Goodbye, darling." Jones kissed his wife perfunctorily and walked briskly round to the garage, his brown leather shoes crunching on the frosty turf of the lawn. He noticed without interest that no lights were on yet next-door, in the house joined by the garages to his own like siamese twins. Jones had unconcealed envy for his neighbour Turner, the nine-till-four accountant with his well-kept flower beds and immaculate lawn. "With all that time and money he can afford to look after his garden," Jones often thought.

The early morning air was sharp at this time of the year and Jones shivered slightly, for he was only wearing alight suit and had not bothered to put on the overcoat that was slung over his arm. He stood in front of the garage door, fumbling with the keys and reminding himself again that it needed a good coat of paint. At last the door was unlocked, and it swung up noisily on rusting rollers.

Jones climbed into his dark blue Ford saloon and flung his overcoat over on to the back seat, then slammed the door shut, putting the key in the ignition with his other hand. As he blew into his cold hands Jones thought of how nice it would be to have a 3.5 litre Rover like Turner had recently bought. But with fifteen years of mortgage still to pay, a replacement for the five-year-old Ford was way down on Jones' list of priorities.

The starter motor whined protestingly when Jones turned the ignition key, but the engine refused to catch. Cursing the weather he tried again, and this time the motor started. Revving the engine Jones switched on the warm air fan, waiting impatiently for the heat to come through. Then he engaged the gears and pulled out of the garage, as usual leaving his wife to close down the door. As he turned into the road he waved to her, a dressing-gown clad figure silhouetted in the doorway, then disappeared in a cloud of smoke as he accelerated away.

He switched on the headlights and then the radio, changing stations to the current affairs programme he always listened to. Dawn was still just over an hour away as he drove through the deserted streets bathed in the orange light of the streetlamps. Soon he left the residential area and then the town itself behind him, avoiding the main roads and taking the back roads and lanes where possible.

For nearly nine years now he had travelled this way to work in the city, and by now he knew the road like the back of his hand,

every bend, pot-hole and inspection cover ingrained in his memory. Relying on this intimate knowledge of the roads he drove by habit, his headlights cutting swathes through the darkness. He drove with speed, changing gear for the corners then accelerating out of them, his body pressed back in the seat. The minor roads favoured by Jones were not important enough to be gritted, and several times the motor raced as the wheels slipped on the icy tarmac.

On the radio the female presenter of the programme gave the time check for 6:30, and Jones instinctively checked his watch, glad to find it was dead-on. A birthday present from his wife, Jones was very proud of his digital watch, with its superb accuracy and stylish finish. He would often boast about its time-keeping at the office, especially when the ordinary watch of one of his colleagues went wrong.

He caught up another slower car as he climbed the hill up to the old windmill, riding dangerously close until he could overtake on a short stretch of straight road. The other car, a green Austin, blared its horn as the blue Ford went past, its driver annoyed at Jones' maniacal driving. Jones had a contempt for other drivers which led him to hate being held up by slower vehicles. This was part of the reason for his preferring the lanes to the main road, with its bottlenecks and traffic jams.

The Greenwich time signal was sounding for seven o'clock as Jones followed the road into a clump of trees, one of the many copses and woods that straddled his route. Suddenly, just as Jones was about to negotiate a particularly tight bend, another car shot round the corner at high speed, headlights on full beam. Thinking that the lights shining on the trees ahead had been further away Jones was caught unawares, and had no time to dip his own headlamps. He swerved violently to avoid the oncoming vehicle, and as the two cars passed, narrowly missing each other, he waved his fist at the driver of the other car, which he noticed was a blue Ford similar to his own. Behind him, hidden by the bend, Jones did not see as the other car, its driver momentarily blinded by Jones' headlamps, skidded out of control on the icy road.

That afternoon as he sat in the traffic jam, listening to the radio and drumming his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel, Jones was torn between elation and sorrow. Firstly elation, because Perring, the Financial Director, had called him into his office at five to five to discuss with him the possibility of there being a company car for Jones. A company car! The very words were music to Jones' ears. No longer would he have to compare his old Ford to Turner's brand new Rover, and who knows, they might even let him have something better. Jones was already counting how much money a company car would save him, money that could provide the little luxuries in life that the family needed.

Secondly, he was sorry because seeing Perring had made him leave the office late, so that he was thrown into the worst of the rush hour. Now, as at last the traffic lights changed to let him through, he was nearly half an hour behind time, the last thing he wanted, especially on a Friday evening. Jones treasured his weekends, for they were the only days of the week when he could be with the children. From Monday to Friday he left home at six fifteen in the morning, long before the kids were awake, and by the time he got back in the evening it was almost their bedtime. This weekend Sheila and he were taking them away to their grandparents and Jones didn't want to spoil it right away by being late home this evening.

Soon he reached his turn-off and was freed from the turmoil of buses, traffic lights, pedestrian crossings and incompetent drivers.

"It's fourteen minutes to six and here's the new release from ..." said the smooth-talking compère of the popular easy listening music programme, as Jones pulled away from the road junction and down the slight incline. The hedge-lined lanes seemed like another world to him, so remote and free of traffic. Taking advantage of the lack of restriction, Jones could put his foot down and gain some time. He sped down the lanes, his foot darting from accelerator to brake and back again, the speedometer flickering around seventy.

"It's five o'clock and here with the news is Jackie Miller." Only half listening to the radio, Jones assumed that the announcer had made a mistake. He waited for the customary apology, but when none came he thought that he'd misheard the announcer, since his attention had been only partly on the radio.

"And now at two minutes past four it's time for Jim Stewart and the Top Thirty." Jones' ears pricked up at this. "Jim Stewart's never on when I'm coming home," he said to himself. "Two minutes past FOUR? Some technician's going to be out of a job

DEATH
TRAP

when they find they're playing the wrong tape." As the harsh voice and poorly played guitars of Number 30 came at him through the speaker, Jones switched stations.

The sound of soft moody synthesizers was replaced by the patter of a fast-talking DJ, "That was the new one from the Deep Fix and now with the time coming up to three fifteen here're The Death Commandos of Love." Before the heavy rhythmic drumming and fast guitars had completed a bar Jones switched stations again, desperately trying to find something with some sense to it. At last he found some sort of discussion programme. Three fifteen? Was this some kind of joke? Jones checked his watch to make sure it wasn't All Fools Day, although he already knew that the answer was no. The digital readout told him more than he'd expected, however. The date was not April 1st, but it was something else that caught Jones' eye. In big rectangular figures was the time:- 3:14.

"It's a coincidence," he told himself, but was not convinced. As he watched, the readout flipped over to the next minute. But instead of 3:15, it said 3:13.

"An electrical fault, that's all it is, and by a coincidence two radio stations have mixed up their tapes." He looked over to the west where the golden disk of the sun was creeping inexorably towards the horizon. "Look, the sun's still there, it's not any higher in the sky. Just calm yourself, Jones." He laughed aloud at how silly he'd been, but it came out as a half insane cackle. He stopped laughing.

Now almost fully sobered up, Jones was ashamed of himself for getting scared so easily. He kept the radio on, though, interested to see for how long the farce would continue. The discussion programme soon finished, and the time check told him that it was two o'clock.

And so it carried on. But by the time it had reached ten o'clock, with what seemed to Jones to be little more than ten minutes for each hour that passed, a nagging doubt at the back of his mind had grown stronger. It was almost dark now, and Jones put on his headlights.

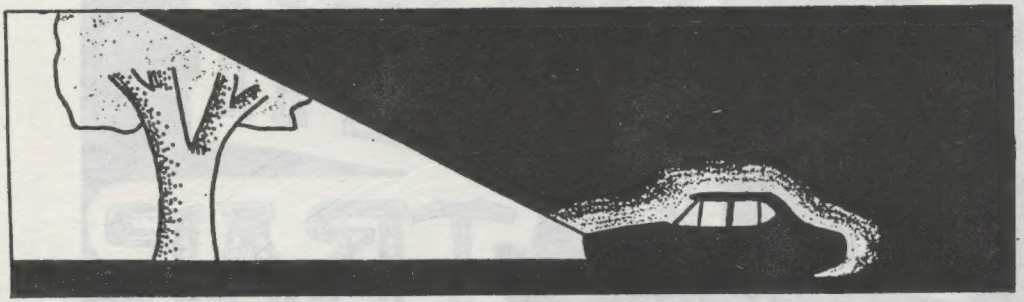
At eight o'clock he looked at his watch, only to find the minutes ticking over like seconds. He suddenly realised that all the while his watch had reflected the time on the radio, and that this was too much of a coincidence to be swept under the carpet. Gripped by a sudden fear he licked his dry lips, now certain that something was terribly wrong but unable to grasp quite what.

Nervously he wiped the back of his hand over his face, and it came away moist and glistening. Sweat trickled down his neck. The sound of his heart in his ears almost drowned the noise of the car as it screamed down a tunnel of light carved through the darkness by his headlamps. He watched the road ahead with wild and staring eyes, uncannily resembling the mad man he drove like. The road passed under a canopy of trees.

"Good morning, it's seven o'clock on the World Today programme, with news and views ..."

Suddenly as he swept round a tight bend in the road he saw another car racing towards him. Blinded by its undipped headlights he rammed on the brakes, but the tyres slipped as if on ice and the car went out of control. The other car passed within inches of his own, and through the afterglow on his retina he glimpsed the other driver's fist waved in anger. Then, as he saw the massive trunk of an oak tree rushing towards him, his brain cleared. He tried to scream as the awful truth came to him, but everything went black.

THE END



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

'THE CURSE OF MAN' and 'DEATH TRAP' first appeared in BACK BRAIN RECLUSE #1 (June 1984).

'STEPPENWOLF' and 'THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ARTFUL DODGER' first appeared in BACK BRAIN RECLUSE #2 (September 1984).

'CIRCULAR ERROR', 'MIRROR MIRROR ON THE WALL', 'CAMERA OUT', 'ALL IN THE GAME' and 'SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO' first appeared in BACK BRAIN RECLUSE #3 (January 1985).

'SWINGING THE LEAD', '... BESIDE THE SEASIDE, BESIDE THE SEA ...', 'AFTER THE RAID', 'AZIMUTH: A MATTER OF ASCENDANCY', 'FLICKERING BLUE EXTREME', 'THE FALCON' and 'THE SPIDERMONGER' first appeared in BACK BRAIN RECLUSE #4 (July 1985).

'... BESIDE THE SEASIDE, BESIDE THE SEA ...' was subsequently reprinted in DAW's **YEAR'S BEST HORROR 1986**, edited by Karl Edward Wagner. 'FLICKERING BLUE EXTREME' has since appeared in the **RHYSLING ANTHOLOGY 1986** (Best Science Fiction Poetry of 1985), being a final nominee in the Best Long Poem category.

'THE CURSE OF MAN' and 'THE FALCON' are copyright (c) Michael Moorcock.

**SPECIAL THANKS OVER THE FIRST FOUR ISSUES TO:**

My Parents, Michael Moorcock, Dave Lashmar and BEANOS, Matt Brooker, David Pringle and INTERZONE, and Chuck Connor,

without whose interest and generosity **BACK BRAIN RECLUSE** would never have got off the ground.

**THANKS ALSO TO:**

Jocelyn Almond, Tom Bingham, Simon Blomfield, Simon Clark, Andrew Darlington, D'Israeli, Tony & June Heathcote, Terry Hopkins, Martin Hull, Simon C. Jones, Nick Joy, Russell Miles, Adriaan Neervoort, Safety Products Ltd., Garry Sawyer, Shep, Steve Sneyd, Nicholas Treadwell, Dave Windett, t. Winter-Damon, 'Anaconda', 'A Pack of Lies', 'ATU XVIII', 'Auguries', 'Catch 22', 'Edition', 'Fanzine Fanatique', 'Folio International', 'Global Tapestry Journal', 'Grim Humour', 'Hooligan Heart', 'Idomo', 'Joy', 'Mad Dog', 'Mirage', 'Orbit', 'Out on the Floor', 'Phonetic System', 'Quartz', 'Red Bass', 'Rouska', 'So What', 'Tears in the Fence', 'The Music Never Stops' and 'To Hell with Poverty'

for contributing, trading, or otherwise lending a hand, and thanks obviously to everyone else not mentioned here but who supported **BACK BRAIN RECLUSE** in some way in the early days.

---

BACK BRAIN RECLUSE

IS DISTRIBUTED BY:

**FAST FICTION**, 27 Bracewell Road, North Kensington, London W10 6AF.
Tel: 01 960 1626.

**MARK ZEISING**, Bookseller, PO Box 806, Willimantic, CT 06226, USA.

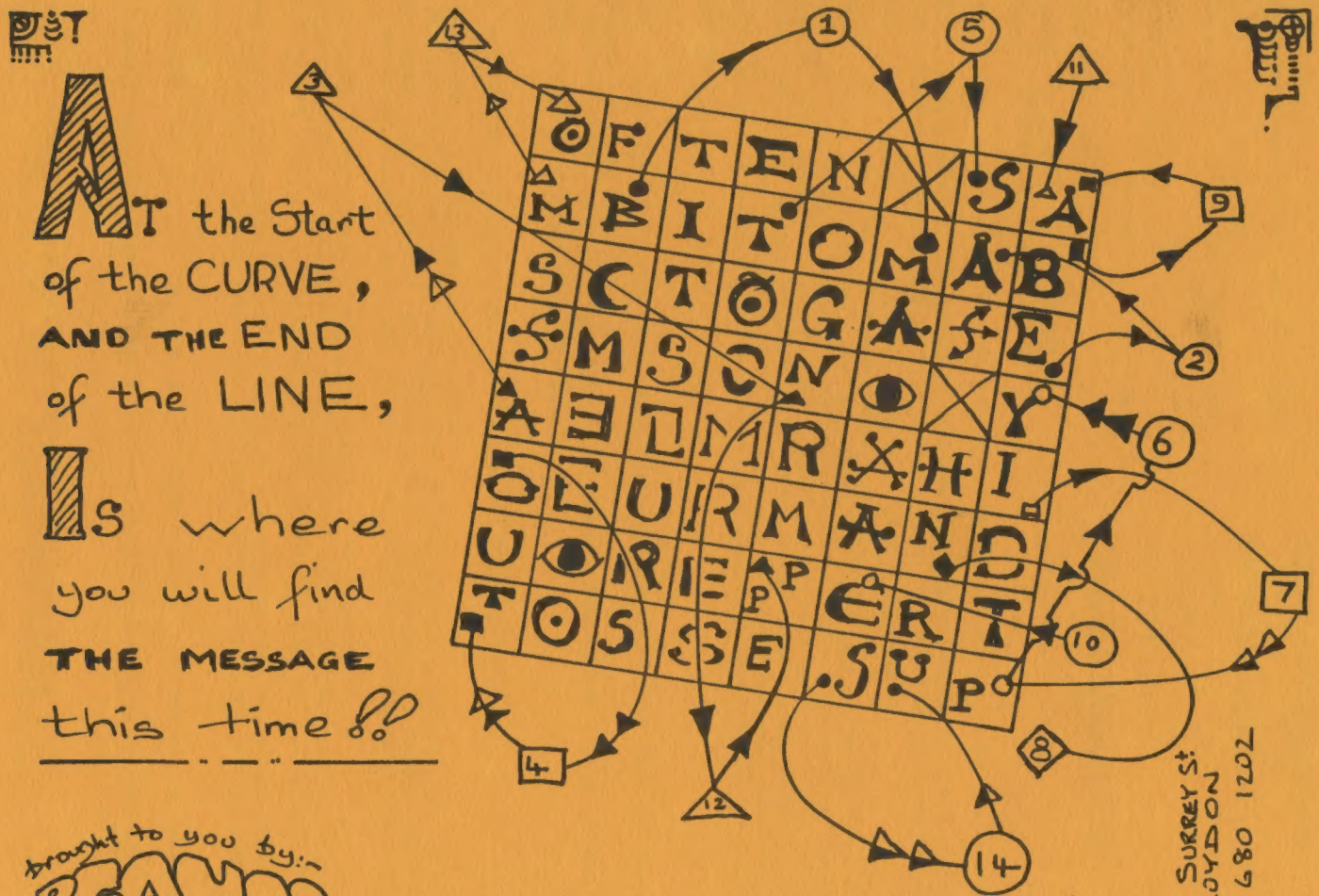
**CHRIS DRUMM** Books, PO Box 445, Polk City, Iowa 50226, USA.

IS PRINTED BY:

**Lucas Service**

Lucas Service UK Limited
2 Pitt Street
Sheffield
South Yorkshire S1 3TG

Telephone : Sheffield (0742) 28681




brought to you by:-
BEANOS England's Largest Second Hand Record Store.
27 SURREY ST.
CROYDON
01-680 1202